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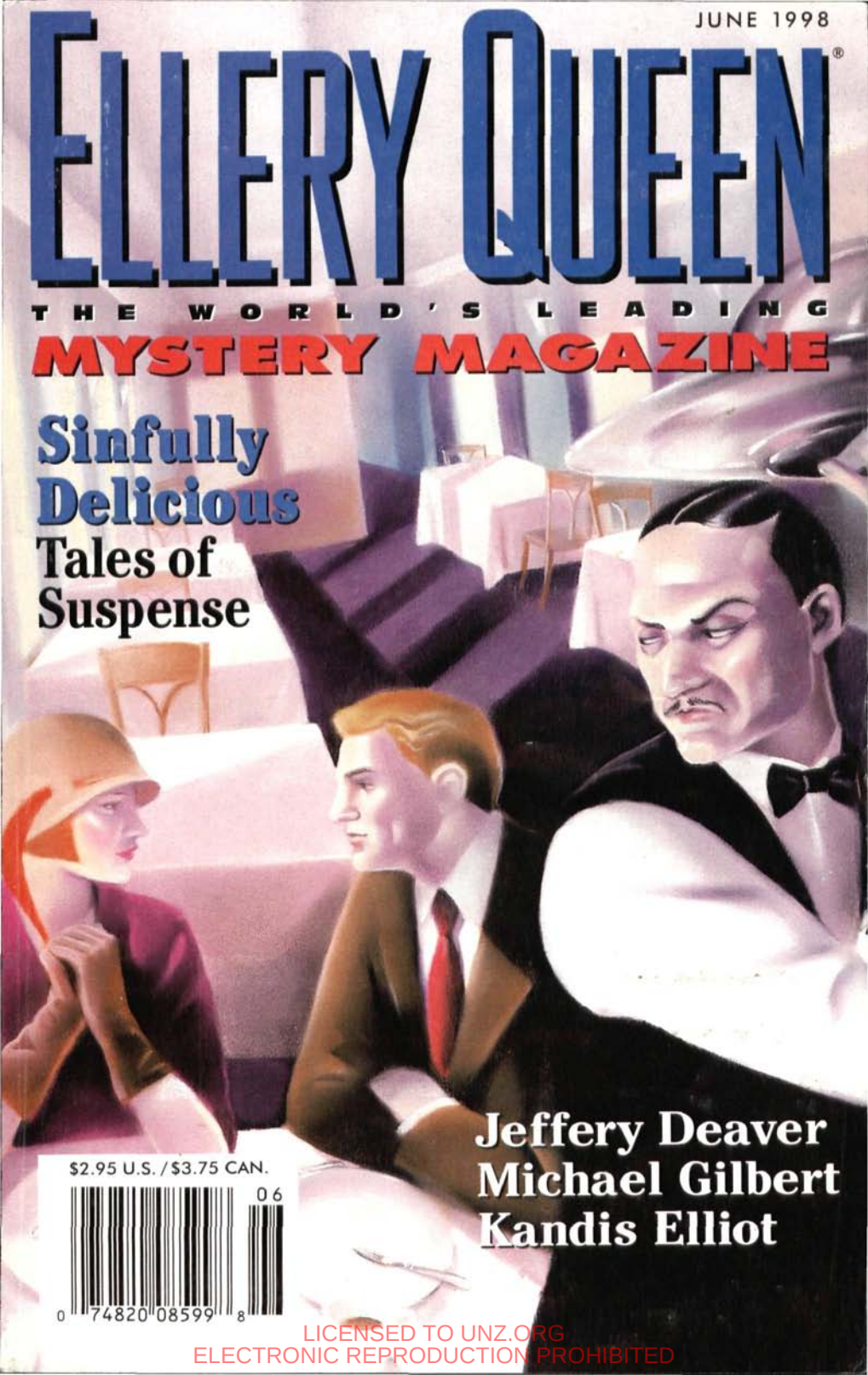

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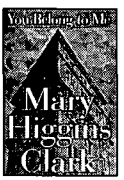

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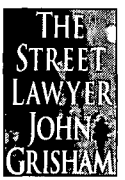

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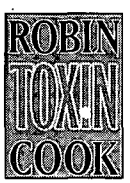

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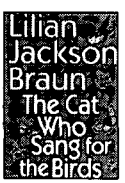

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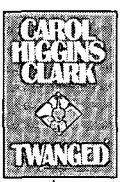

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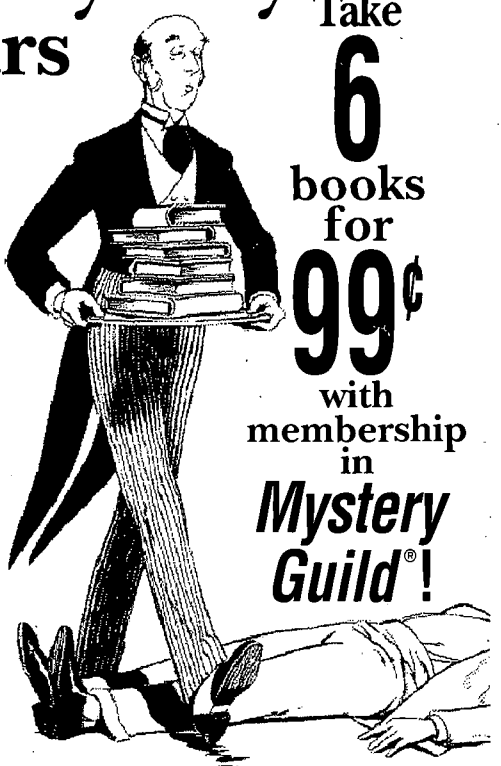

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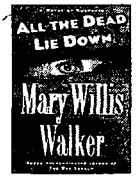

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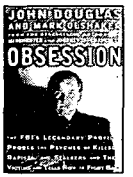

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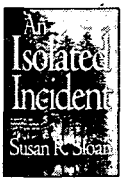

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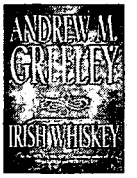

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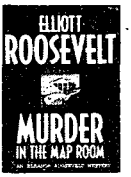

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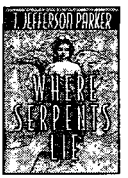

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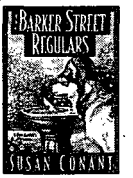

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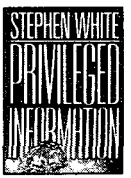

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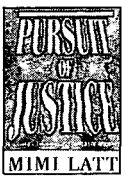

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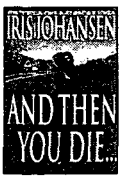

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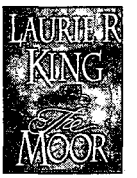

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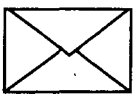

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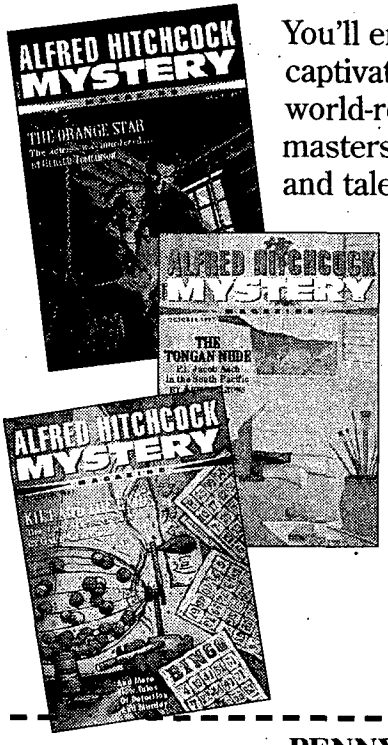

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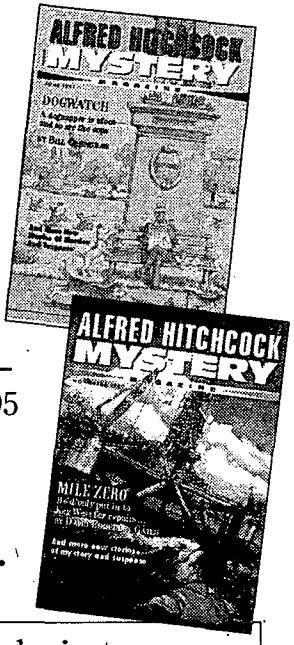

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THE FALL GUY

by Jeffery Deaver

Her headlights lit the sensuous sweep of the road.

Cruising through the dark pines, swaying left right, left right. A damp evening, a cold spring. Her Lexus strayed slightly over the centerline of the wet asphalt and she wondered whether she'd had two martinis with Don or three.

Only two, she decided, and sped up.

She drove this same road, from her job in New Hampshire to her home just over the Massachusetts border, every weekday night—and every night she thought the same thing on this stretch of Route 28: Sensuous curves.

Like the cliché sign two miles back: Soft Shoulder.

A lot of nights—slightly drunk, listening to Michael Bolton on the radio—she'd laugh at those words on the yellow diamond. Tonight she was curiously somber.

Twelve miles from home.

Carolyn eased her stockinged foot off the gas. Her white Ferragamo spike heels sat on the seat next to her (She always drove barefoot; less for control than to avoid scuffing). Then she piloted the car through the final set of, yes, sensuous curves that led to the minuscule town of Dunning.

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The gas station, the general store, a propane company, an old motel, a liquor store, and an antique shop in which she'd never—in the five years of commuting to and from the hospital—seen anyone buy a single thing.

She slowed to thirty at the rusted harvester, which was where the avid young cops of Dunning caught their speeders and solemnly tormented anybody driving a vehicle nicer than a Buick. She stopped here every night on the way home from work—buying gas and a large coffee—but the service station attendants never seemed to notice that she was a regular.

Author of more than a dozen novels, five of which have brought him movie deals, Jeffery Deaver is proving to be a favorite of *EQMM* readers: In 1997, he won his second *EQMM* Readers Award for "Double Jeopardy" (9-10/97). He is also currently nominated for the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award for "The Kneeling Soldier" (*EQMM* 3/97). Tip: Readers in search of Deaver novels may want to check under the pseudonym William Jefferies. ✝

As she climbed out of the car she saw another customer, a man with a craggy face and a five-o'clock shadow, leaning against his car, talking on a cell phone. He nodded unhappily; whoever was speaking on the other end of the line was delivering bad news.

Carolyn slipped the nozzle into her gas tank and set the catch on the handle. She stood up, felt a chill. She was wearing her beige Evan Picone suit, low cut, no blouse, and a short skirt. With some satisfaction she noticed the customer's eyes lift from the asphalt and scan her body. Even though there was something crude about him—the craggy face, the meaty hands—he was dressed well. A smooth gray suit and a dark trenchcoat with lots of flaps. His car was a Lincoln, golden brown. It cost, she figured, about the same as hers. She approved of men in expensive cars.

The nozzle snapped off and she went inside to pay.

A cup of black coffee, a roll of Lifesavers. Pep-O-Mint. Without a hint of recognition, the young clerk looked up from his portable TV only long enough to glance at her chest while he gave her the change; maybe it was just her face he didn't recognize.

She stepped back outside, glancing at the man with the Lincoln as he tossed his phone on the seat of the car and reached into his pocket, fishing for money. He glanced toward her again.

Then he froze. His eyes went wide, focusing just past her.

And she felt an arm snake around her waist, felt cold metal at her ear.

"Oh God . . ."

"Shut up, lady," the young man's voice stuttered in her ear. He was

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nervous and smelled of whiskey. "We're gonna get in your car and drive. You scream, you're dead."

Carolyn had never been mugged. She'd lived in Chicago and New York City and briefly in Paris and the only time she'd ever been physically threatened the perpetrator wasn't a crook but the wife of the man who owned the flat on the Left Bank. She was now paralyzed with fear.

As the mugger dragged her toward her car she stammered, "Please, just take the keys."

"No way, babe. I want you's much as I want your wheels."

"Please, no!" she moaned. "I'll give you a lot of money. I'll—"

"Shut up. You're coming with me."

"No, she's not." Lincoln Man had walked up to the passenger side of her Lexus. He was standing between them and the car. His eyes were steady. He didn't seem afraid. The skinny kid, on the other hand, seemed terrified. He shoved the gun out forward. "Get the hell outa the way, mister. Nobody'll get hurt, you do what I say."

The man said calmly, "You want the car, take the car. Take *my* car. It's new. Got twelve thousand miles on it." He held up the keys.

"I'm taking her and her car and you're getting outa my way. I don't want to shoot you." The gun wavered. He was a scrawny young guy, backwoods, with dishwater brown hair in a snaky ponytail.

Lincoln Man smiled and continued to talk calmly. "Look, friend. Carjacking's no big deal. But a kidnapping or rape count? Forget about it. You'll go away forever."

"Get the hell out of my way!" his voice crackled. He moved forward a few feet, dragging Carolyn along with him. She was whimpering. Hated herself for it but she had no control.

Lincoln Man stood his ground and the kid shoved the gun directly into his face.

What happened next happened fast.

She saw:

Lincoln Man turning his palms toward the mugger in a gesture of surrender, stepping back slightly.

The passenger door swinging open and the kid shoving her inside. (Carolyn thinking crazily: I've never been in the passenger seat of my car before, the seat's too far forward, I'll tear my pantyhose . . .)

The mugger walking around the front of the car to the driver's side of the Lexus, forcing Lincoln Man—hands still raised—out of the way.

Carolyn glanced hopelessly into the gas station window. The young attendant was still behind the counter, still eating potato chips, still watching *Roseanne* on the tiny TV.

The mugger started to climb into the car, then paused, looking back, realizing the nozzle was still in the gas tank of the car.

Then Lincoln Man was moving fast, lunging over the hood and grabbing the mugger's gun hand. He gasped in surprise and fought fiercely to free his hand.

But Lincoln Man was stronger. Carolyn pushed open her door and

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sprang out as the two men tumbled onto the hood of the Lexus and grappled for the gun. Lincoln Man banged his opponent's wrist onto the windshield several times and the black pistol flew from his grasp. Carolyn squinted as it landed at her feet. The gun didn't go off.

She'd never held a gun in her life, not a pistol anyway, and she now crouched down and lifted it, felt its heavy weight, felt its heat. She shoved the muzzle into the face of the mugger. He went limp as cloth.

Lincoln Man—a good foot taller than the kid—rolled off the hood and took him by the collar.

The mugger looked at Carolyn's uneasy eyes and must've concluded that she wasn't going to be shooting anybody. He pushed Lincoln Man away with surprising strength and took off at a gallop into the brush beside the gas station.

Carolyn thrust the gun generally in his direction.

Lincoln Man said urgently, "Just shoot for his legs, not his back. You'll be in trouble, you kill him."

But her hands began to tremble and by the time she forced herself to steady it, he was gone.

In the distance a car started, a car with a rattling tailpipe. Then a screech of tires.

"Oh God, oh God . . ." Carolyn closed her eyes and leaned against her car.

Lincoln Man came up to her. "You all right?"

She nodded. "Yes. No. I don't know. . . . What can I say? Thank you."

"Uhm." He nodded toward the gun, which she was carelessly pointing at his belly.

"Oh, sorry . . ." She offered it to him. But he glanced down and said, "You better hold onto it until the cops get here. I'm not supposed to have too much to do with guns."

Carolyn didn't understand this. For a moment she thought that he was in recovery and touching a gun would be like somebody in AA taking a drink. Maybe people got addicted to guns the way other people, her husband, for instance, got hooked on gambling or women or coke.

"What?"

"I have a record." He said this without shame or pride but in a tone that suggested he was used to mentioning it early in a conversation, getting the fact out of the way, and seeing what the reaction was. Carolyn had none, and he continued, "Somebody sees me with a pistol . . . well, it'd be problems."

"Oh," she said, as if he were a Safeway clerk and was explaining about an expired spaghetti sauce coupon. His eyes dipped again to the beige suit. Well, more accurately, to the part of her body where her suit was not.

He glanced inside the station, where the clerk continued obliviously to watch his TV program. He said, "We better call the cops. *He's* sure not going to do it."

"Wait," she said. "Can I ask a question?"

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"Sure."

"What'd you do time for."

He hesitated. "Well," he said slowly. And then must've decided that Carolyn, with her beautiful suit, her tight skirt, her black lacy stockings from Victoria's Secret, this wonderful, fragrant package (Opium, $49 the ounce), would never be his and so he had nothing to lose. He said, "Assault with a deadly weapon. Five counts. Guilty on all of them. And conspiracy to commit assault. So, should we call those cops?"

"No," she answered, slipping the gun into the glove compartment of her car. "I think we should have a drink."

And nodded toward the motel lounge.

They awoke three hours later.

He looked like a smoker but he didn't smoke. He looked like a drinker too and drink he did but he'd had only a half of a beer to her three, from the six-pack they bought at the party store beside the motel, after one martini each in the bar.

They stared at the cracked ceiling.

"You have someplace you have to be?" she asked.

"Doesn't everybody?"

"I mean now. Tonight."

"No. I'm just here for the day. Going back home tomorrow."

Home, he'd explained over the martini, was Boston. He was staying the night at the Courtyard Inn in Klammath.

His name was Lawrence—emphatically not Larry. After prison he'd gone straight and given up his job of collecting debts for some men he described vaguely as "local businessmen."

"I collected the vig, they call it," he'd explained. "The interest on loan-shark loans. You gotta pay the vig."

"Like Rocky."

"Yeah, sorta," Lawrence said.

When she asked his last name his eyes went cloudy and though he said Anderson he might as well have answered Smith.

He said, "None of the above," to her inquiry about a wife and family, though that answer was delivered quickly and she was inclined to believe him.

The one thing she knew about him for certain was that he was an incredible lover.

Sensuous road, sensuous curves . . .

Nothing soft about his shoulders.

For nearly two hours, they'd kissed, touched, tasted, pressed together. There was nothing kinky about him, nothing odd. He was simply, well, overwhelming. That was the only way she could describe it. His strong arms around her, his large body atop hers. . . . Here she'd set out to seduce him but he'd done the seducing—and hadn't even been trying to.

As they lay now in the warm, cheap bed, she watched his chest rising

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and falling. There was a nasty scar on it, clearly visible beneath the black, curly hair. She wanted to ask him about it but couldn't bring herself to. If it was the result of a fight she tried to imagine what had happened to the other guy.

"Lawrence?"

He glanced at her cautiously. This was the revered moment after coupling. A risky time. Certain conventions had to be followed. Honesty was dangerous but sincerity a must. Synonyms for *commitment* and *love* and the *future*—if not those words themselves—had ruined many rosy evenings.

But Carolyn's mind wasn't on any of those matters. She was picturing the black gun in her glove compartment and the high, frantic voice of the man who'd nearly kidnapped her.

"What do you do for a living now?" she asked him.

A pause.

"I used to sell auto parts. Well, manage a store. I'm between things right now."

"Got fired?"

"Yeah, got fired." He stretched, a bone popped. "You got a record, they'll fire you if some kid in the mailroom takes a box of staples home. You're always the number-one suspect. I came up for a job interview in Hammond today. Didn't work out."

She remembered his sullen face during the conversation on his cell phone.

"Can I ask *you* a question?" he asked.

"Sure. I'm married, no children. I love sex and I drink too much. Anything else?"

"Why didn't you want to call the cops?"

But instead of answering she asked, "Why didn't you get shook back there?"

He shrugged those great shoulders again. "I've had guns pointed at me before. I can tell when somebody's going to use a piece and when he's not. Oh, that kid'd been a pro, I'd've said so long lady and hoped the state troopers got to you before it was too late."

"Have you ever killed anybody?"

The hesitation was his answer.

"No more questions from you till you answer mine," he said. "Why no cops?"

"Because I have a business proposition for you."

"What, you need some auto parts?"

"No, I want you to kill my husband."

"Divorce him," Lawrence said. "That's what they make lawyers for."

"He's worth a lot of money."

"If he's cheating, you'll get half."

"Well . . ."

"Oh. He's not the only guilty party." Then Lawrence laughed and ges-

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tured toward the bed they were lying in. "Guess not. Who cheated first?"

"He did." Then she added, "Well, he got caught first."

"Tough luck. But I'm not a hit man. I never was."

"What can I say to convince you?"

"Nothing. Not. A. Thing."

"What can I, *do* to convince you?" She moved her hands along his body, pinched his thigh playfully.

He laughed.

He stopped smiling when she asked, "Fifty thousand?"

But after a moment: "I've done my time. I didn't like it."

"A hundred?"

The hesitation was probably only a millisecond but to Carolyn it was plenty long enough.

Lawrence said, "I don't think so."

"'Don't think'—that's not the same as 'no.'"

"It's not easy killing somebody. Well, matter of fact, that part *is* easy. But getting away's tricky. That's the *almost-impossible* part."

As she often did in the meetings she ran at the hospital—when the people who worked for her would come up with excuses for not having their reports or proposals in on time—Carolyn said, "I'm hearing 'almost.' I'm hearing 'tricky.' But all that tells me is it's doable."

"You ever threatened him?"

She shrugged. "I ran into him and his girlfriend once at the mall. I lost it. I said I'd kill them both . . . No, I think I said they'd wish they were dead by the time I got through with them."

"Ouch."

"I don't think anybody heard me."

"Well," he said slowly, like a doctor formulating an opinion. "You've got a reason to kill him. That's a problem. It means you've got to find a fall guy. You've got to make it look like it's more likely somebody else committed the crime than you, even if you have a motive. We need—"

"Another suspect?"

"Yeah."

She smiled and eased her breasts against him. "Like a car-jacker. Or a mugger?"

"Sure." His eyes swung to the parking lot, nodded. "That kid, we've got his gun. . . ."

Stan had several guns. Carolyn remembered the forms he'd had to fill out to buy them; she knew gun shops kept good records of ownership. She mentioned this now.

"Might be stolen, might not be his," Lawrence said.

"It'd have his fingerprints on it."

"We'd have to wipe it—you touched it, remember?" But then he laughed.

"What?"

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"Well, even if we wiped the gun, the bullets'd still have *his* prints on them."

She nuzzled against his neck.

"But," Lawrence added, "he's just a car-jacker. You really want to bring him down on a murder charge?"

"He was going to rape me," she pointed out. "Maybe kill me. Look at it like this: We'll be doing a good deed, getting him put away before he hurts someone."

"A hundred thousand?" Lawrence gazed up at the ceiling. "You know, those social workers and counselors . . . in prison, I mean? They'd ask about all sorts of crazy stuff. What appealed to me about antisocial behavior? What was I angry about? Was my childhood *conflicted?"* He laughed. "They didn't like my answer. I told 'em I could make five thousand a day just to break some poor schmuck's arm. Who the hell *wouldn't* want a job like that?"

"Well, here's a chance for your nest egg." She kissed his ear and whispered words that always thrilled her, "Tax free."

He thought for a moment. "We'd have to set it up carefully. Maybe we find the motel where he's meeting his girlfriend—"

"I know it. They always go to the same place."

"How does it work?" He laughed. "I was married for ten years and I never had an affair. Would she leave first? Or him?"

"She'd leave first. He'd wait, pay for the room."

"Okay, after he pays, he gets in the car. I'm there waiting for him."

"And you shoot him?"

Lawrence laughed. "In a motel parking lot? With people around? I don't think so. No, I'll get him to drive me someplace deserted. Do it there. Make it look like we fought and I shot him. Then I panicked and jumped out of the car and ran. I'll drop the gun on the way. When should we do it? Sooner's better. I need the money bad. I owe big-time on that Lincoln."

"Stan usually goes to see her on Tuesday and Thursday nights."

"Today's Tuesday," he said.

She nodded. "That's where he is now."

"Well, day after tomorrow. Sure. It's a good setup. We've got a murder weapon that can't be traced to us, a good motive. And a fall guy."

Carolyn rolled atop Lawrence once more, straddled him, feeling his interest in her Jane Fonda'd body rapidly reviving. And she thought: We sure *do* have a fall guy, Lawrence. You. An ex-con out of work, a man with a great motive to hijack Stan's spiffy Cadillac.

"I think it'll work," he said.

"I think it will too," Carolyn said, and started to chew on his lower lip.

Sensuous curves . . . .

The car gently rocking back and forth.

It was Thursday, another overcast spring evening, and Carolyn was

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wearing a long-sleeved navy blouse and a pleated skirt that ended halfway between knee and ankle. A couple of the assistants in the hospital office had looked at her with surprise. No cleavage, no thigh, no straining buttons. The Aqua-Net had remained capped and her hair was pulled back in a plain ponytail. She'd decided that after she made the anonymous call to the police reporting one man shooting another in a green Cadillac, she'd have to speed back home and prepare to be the demure, innocent widow. A costume change might be hard to manage in time.

She found herself in an odd state: nearly aroused. The sashaying of the car, the cool air on her skin. And, she had to admit, something about the thought of Stan dying turned her on.

So did getting her hands on his money. He was such a miser. He wouldn't even *buy* her the damn Lexus. It had to be a lease.

Thinking about Lawrence, too.

Such a great lover.

But a better fall guy.

Too bad, Larry.

It wouldn't be easy, though. She couldn't call the cops from the car phone, of course; there'd be a record of the call. So she decided to pick the place for the hit herself. This would make sense to him—she was the native, he wouldn't know the area. She'd suggest that Lawrence drive Stan to Cardiff Falls. There, the county road stretched through a steep valley, very hard to climb out of. A mile up the road was a convenience store with two telephones outside.

She'd follow them and while he was killing Stan she'd slip out of her car and flatten the rear tire of the Cadillac with the kitchen knife she had in her purse. (She'd let the air out of Stan's spare tire that morning.) Then she'd leave Lawrence there and speed to the store, make the call to the cops and continue down the road to the highway and race home. Lawrence'd be trapped in the valley. It would take him forty minutes to get out on foot. Plenty of time for the cops to find him.

Perfect.

Her thoughts segued again to the Heritage motel, where her husband was right at the moment.

She pictured them in bed together.

Pictured the girlfriend: Loretta Samples . . . Lorrie . . . An unremarkable woman. Blonde, boringly pretty. When Carolyn had stalked them to the mall, *Lorrie* was wearing a ludicrous black floppy hat and was walking close to Stan with his elbow seated hard against her chest. They'd braked to a fast stop in front of the banshee wife. Oh, had she enjoyed *that* little scene.

Lor-rie . . .

What were they doing at this minute? Carolyn wondered, gripping the Lexus's steering wheel so hard her fingers cramped. Drinking wine? Was he kissing her feet? Lying on top of her and hooking his longish

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brown hair behind his ears, a habit that first charmed then repulsed her.

Then Lawrence's motel loomed and she braked hard. She pulled past it, like they'd agreed, and he slipped into the car before it stopped moving.

"Go," he said.

She sped back onto the road.

She'd expected that he'd be dressed in, well, killer clothes. Like a commando, maybe. Black sweater and jeans, or something. But he was just wearing one of his business suits under the elaborate trenchcoat. His tie was printed with tiny yellow fish. Ugly, tasteless. For some reason this made her feel better about turning him in.

"You're sure he's at the motel?"

"He called and said he was going to be late for dinner. He had a meeting with Bill Mathiesson."

"And he doesn't?"

"Not unless it's in London, which is where Bill is this week. According to his office."

Lawrence gave a bitter laugh. "You gonna lie, lie smart." He looked at his watch. "What do you know about his girlfriend?"

Another heat-flash of jealousy coursed through her. "She's got small boobs and needs a nose job."

"She married too?"

"Yeah. She's just like Stan. Rich bitch. Inherited Daddy's money and thinks she can get away with anything. They deserve each other."

"Well, let's hope she leaves the room first. Witnesses're no good." He pulled on tight-fitting cotton work gloves.

"Don't you wear rubber gloves?"

"No," he said. "Cloth is better. No fingerprints inside either. To trace you to the gloves."

"Oh." She supposed that Lawrence Anderson Smith, a.k.a. the Lincoln Man, a.k.a. the love-maker, had been very good at collecting debts.

He opened the glove compartment and took out the pistol. Carolyn glanced at it. They all looked alike to her. Black, dangerous.

He clicked it open. She saw there were six bullets in the six chambers. Lawrence asked, "Did you wipe it?"

"No," she said. "I don't know how."

He laughed. "You just . . . wipe it." He pulled a Kleenex from the box on her dashboard and carefully wiped the metal.

"There," she said. "There it is."

Ahead of them was the motel. The red vacancy light pulsed unappealingly. It was a seedy place. (Carolyn insisted that her lovers take her to bed-and-breakfasts, or at least the Hyatt.)

She parked on the street, with a view of the parking lot. There was Stan's Cadillac, in the shade of dark green that she'd originally liked but soon found disgusting. She wondered which car was the woman's.

Lorrie's car . . .

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"Oh, there's a good place I know to do it," she said, as if she'd just thought of the idea. "Cardiff Falls, Route 58. It's about five miles from here. It's always real deserted. Just keep going on Maple Branch about a mile, to the Mobil station, then turn left. That'll be route 58."

He nodded, then said, "You stay right here. I'm going to hide in the bushes. I'll get him in the car and drive there, find a place by the side of the road. You follow us."

Carolyn took a deep breath. "Okay."

"Afterwards, you drop me at my hotel and go home. When he doesn't show up tonight, call the cops. Remember, don't overact when you find out what happened. It's better to looked stunned than hysterical. Sort of zoned-out."

"Stunned not hysterical." Carolyn nodded.

Then he leaned forward and gripped her neck hard, pulled her to him. She kissed back, just as hard. She enjoyed a kinky little shiver feeling the gloves on her neck. Maybe she'd have to play dress-up sometime with Don. Or somebody. Maybe leather would be fun . . .

He released her and she looked into his eyes. "Good luck," she said.

He climbed out, crouched beside the car, looked around. The street was deserted. Still hunched over, he ran through a wedge of shadow beside the motel and disappeared behind a row of boxwood.

Carolyn laid her head against the headrest and clicked on Lite FM, your favorite soft hits all the time.

Now, finally, the nervousness descended like a spray of cold rain. The horror of the evening unfurled within her and her hands began to quiver.

What'm I doing? she wondered.

The answer came to her: what I should've done a long time ago. Suddenly her uneasiness turned to rage. I hate these damn clothes, I want to be dressed up, I want to be going out for nice wine and martinis, I want that idiot Stan out of my life, I want to get the whole thing over. I want—

Two explosions from the motel.

Sitting forward, staring into the parking lot at Stan's Cadillac.

Two more bangs.

They sounded like gunshots.

Lights went on in some of the windows.

Had something gone wrong?

Carolyn felt the fear inside her like a cold stone.

No, no. They were just backfires, that's all.

She scanned the parking lot. More lights came on. Doors opened. Several people stepped onto balconies, looking around.

Then motion to her right. She glanced toward it.

Lawrence stood in the shadows. His eyes were wide; on his face, a look of terror. Was he holding his stomach? Had he been shot? She couldn't tell.

"What?" Carolyn screamed.

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He looked around, in panic, then gestured her frantically to leave. Mouthing, "Go . . . go. Get home fast." He disappeared back into the bushes.

Had a guard or off-duty cop seen him with the gun?

Two people stepped from the manager's office, a fat woman in turquoise and a skinny man wearing a short-sleeved white shirt. They looked around the U-shaped building, said something to each other, then listened to some of the people on the balconies and the sidewalk in front of the ground-floor rooms. Carolyn couldn't tell what they were saying.

She looked back toward where Lawrence had whispered his warning. No sign of him.

Time to go, she thought. This is trouble.

She floored the accelerator.

But as the car sped forward she heard a soft pop and the whup whup whup of a tire going flat.

No! Not now! Please . . .

She floored the accelerator in panic. The motel guests and the couple from the manager's office were staring at the Lexus as it swerved down the street, front tires screaming and smoking. Then the rubber fell off the rim of the flat rear tire and the car jolted to a stop against the curb.

"Damn! Damn, damn!" she screamed, slamming her fist on the steering wheel.

In the rearview mirror, flashing lights, speeding toward the motel. A police car coming.

No, no . . .

The young officers glanced at her car but passed it by and trotted up to the crowd of guests by the manager's office. Several of them pointed to a room on the first floor, room 103, and the cops hurried to it.

Two other cars showed up and then a boxy ambulance.

Run or stay?

Hell, they can trace the car. It'd seem more suspicious if she ran.

I'll come up with a story. My husband called me and asked for a ride.

My husband wanted me to meet him here. . . .

I happened to see my husband's car . . .

The cops knocked on the door to room 103 and when there was no answer, the skinny man in the white shirt unlocked the door. He stood back as the cops, their guns drawn, pushed inside.

One stepped back outside immediately and motioned for the ambulance attendants. They ran inside but returned a moment later, moving slowly. If it was Stan's room, and if Stan was inside, Carolyn guessed he was dead.

But what had happened? What?—

A rapping on the car window behind her.

She screamed and turned around. A large cop was standing beside her. She stared at him, her mouth open.

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"Miss, could you move your car?" asked the beefy, crew-cut cop politely.

"I—The tire. It's flat."

"Is something wrong, ma'am?"

"No. Nothing's wrong. I just . . . It's just that I had a flat tire."

"Could I see your license and registration, please."

"Why?"

"You're in a no-parking zone, ma'am. You have to show me your license and registration."

"Well, yes," she said, staring at him, his badge, his walkie-talkie. "I see. Well. Sure." She didn't move.

A moment passed. "Then would you please show them to me?"

"I—"

"Ma'am, you're acting kind of strange. I'd like to ask you to step out of your vehicle."

"Well, now, officer . . ." She smiled and leaned toward him, easing her arms together. Only after a glance at his perplexed face did she realize that the attention-getting valley between her breasts was hidden by her conservative blue blouse.

"Please, ma'am."

She climbed out of the car.

"You been drinking?"

"No, officer. Well, I had one beer a couple of hours ago. Well, two."

"I see."

Then she glanced at the rear wheel, frowning. It looked as if somebody put a trap under the tire—a piece of wood with a couple of nails hammered through it.

The cop noticed her gaze. "Damn kids. They do that sometimes for pranks. Throw 'em in the road. Think it's funny. This's your current address?"

"Yes," she said absently. Eyes on the motel room. More police cars had arrived, there were a dozen now, their lights flashing in alarming red and blue. Two men in suits and badges around their necks—one with bushy hair, one balding—arrived and stepped into room 103.

The cop walked to the rear of the Lexus to check the license plate. He seemed calm and reasonable. Carolyn was relaxing. He'd let her go. Sure he would. It'll be okay. Just stay calm and they'll never put anything together.

And then the bald, suited man—a detective, she guessed—wandered out of the motel room and walked toward his unmarked car, speaking on his cell phone. "We have a multiple homicide at the Heritage Inn. Victims are a Loretta Samples, female cauc, thirty-two, and a Stanley Ciarelli, male cauc, thirty-nine."

"What?" blurted the crew-cut cop, looking up from the driver's license he held.

"Oh Jesus," said Carolyn Ciarelli.

"Detective," the traffic cop said. "Think you better come over here."

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Five minutes later she was sitting in the back of the patrol car—no handcuffs at least—where she'd been asked to remain until everything got sorted out.

A young patrolman came running up to the detectives. He held a large plastic bag containing the pistol Lawrence had apparently dropped as he fled.

"What've we got here?" one detective asked.

"Probable murder weapon," the young officer said a little too eagerly. He drew snickers from the seasoned detectives, Mutt and Jeff.

"Let's see it," the balding detective said. "Hey, Charlie, any latents?"

An officer wearing latex gloves walked over to them. He was carrying a box with a wand attached, like a small neon tube. He shone a greenish light on the gun, examining it carefully.

"Nup, not a whorl or ridge."

Thank God Lawrence had wiped the prints off.

"But," Charlie added, pulling on an eye loupe, "we got something here. Looks like a bit of blue tissue caught in the cylinder release catch." He examined it closely. "Yep, pretty sure it's Kleenex."

Oh my God, no . . .

She glanced behind her to see that the crew-cut cop was already looking in the Lexus. "Look what I found here, sir."

He pointed to the wad of blue Kleenex that Lawrence had dropped on the floor after he'd wiped the gun.

Well, so what? There were hundreds of thousands of boxes of Kleenex around the country. How could they prove—

Charlie unwadded the Kleenex carefully. There was a triangular tear in the center. Where the scrap on the gun would fit like the last piece in a jigsaw puzzle.

Another officer came up to the detectives holding the cloth gloves. The bushy-haired detective, now wearing latex gloves himself, lifted them. Smelled the palm. "Women's perfume."

Carolyn started to hyperventilate.

"Sir," another cop called, "ran the registration on that weapon. It's the victim's. Stanley Ciarelli."

No! Impossible. It was the same gun the mugger'd had. She was sure. Had he stolen it from Stan's den?

Carolyn realized all the cops were staring at her.

"Mrs. Ciarelli?" the bushy-headed detective asked, pulling his handcuffs from the back of his belt and opening the door.

"No, no, you don't understand," she cried.

He bent down, sniffed the air near her neck. "Mrs. Ciarelli, what kind of perfume are you wearing?"

After he read her the Miranda rights and put her back in the rear seat of the patrol car—*with* cuffs this time—she heard a faint squealing of tires in the distance. She stared at the approaching car but her mind was elsewhere.

All right, let's figure it out, she thought. Let's say Lawrence and the

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mugger are in this together. Maybe the mugger's a friend of his. They steal Stan's gun. I stop in Dunning for coffee and gas. They could've followed me and found out I stop there every night. They make it look like it's a mugging, I sleep with Lawrence . . .

But why?

What's he up to? Who *is* he?

Just then the car that had been speeding toward the motel skidded to a stop nearby. It was a golden-brown Lincoln.

A man leapt out, leaving the door open, and ran, panicky, toward the doorway of room 103.

"No, no! My wife . . ."

A cop restrained him and pulled him back from the door. He was sobbing. "I came as soon as you called, I came as soon as you called. I can't believe it! No, no, no . . ."

The cop's arm slipped around the shoulders of the fancy, navy-blue trenchcoat and he led the sobbing man back to the detectives, who gazed at him with sympathy. The bald one asked softly, "Your name's Samples?"

"That's right," he said, struggling to control his sorrow. "Lawrence Samples." Breathlessly, he asked, "You mean . . . she was cheating on me? My wife was cheating on me? And somebody's killed her?"

You've got to make it look like it's more likely somebody else committed the crime than you, even if you have a motive.

And for an instant, unseen by the officers, Lawrence cast a glance toward Carolyn, a look that could only be described as amused. Then, as she began screaming at him in fury, slamming her shackled wrists against the window, his eyes went dull again and he covered them with shaking hands. "Oh, Lorrie . . . Lorrie . . . I just don't believe it! No, no, no . . ."●

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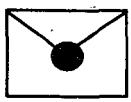

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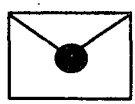

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THE PROBLEM OF THE UNFOUND DOOR

by Edward D. Hoch

The historical detective story continues to gain in popularity as more and more titles become available. The form suits best the writer who is interested in deduction over other methods of crime solving—and who enjoys doing research: It fits Edward D. Hoch to a T. Mr. Hoch has so many reference books in his collection that no matter how exotic the topic of his tale, he rarely needs to visit the library. As for deduction, he is the modern master of its use in the short story, as you'll see here.

It was the summer of 1940 (Dr. Sam Hawthorne was telling his guest), and the war in Europe was heating up. More than three hundred thousand British and French troops had been evacuated from Dunkirk in late May and early June as the German army invaded the Low Countries and France. The *Luftwaffe* was regularly attacking convoys in the English Channel and several cities, ports, and airfields in southeast England had been bombed by midsummer.

The war was still a long way from Northmont, though the mayor and town council were reminded of it when a small community of Anglican nuns who'd settled in our town asked permission to bring over some British children. The south of London had already been hit by a few stray bombs and the evacuation of women and children had begun.

I had firsthand knowledge of the Sisters of Saint George because they'd chosen me as their doctor. Sister Simeon had explained it to me on my first visit. "Hawthorne is such a literary name. We knew you must be a good man."

"He wrote *The Scarlet Letter,*" I reminded her with a smile.

The small congregation had come to Northmont two years earlier, purchasing the old Bates estate out on Town Line Road. There were only eight of them in the beginning. Sister Simeon had come later, as abbess of the convent, when the original abbess, Sister Luke, fell ill. That was when I first entered the life of the Sisters of Saint George.

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Sadly, there was little I or anyone could do for Sister Luke in her eighty-fifth year. She died before Christmas of '39 and was buried on the convent grounds.

Shortly after the nuns arrived in the summer of '38 they had a high brick wall built around their entire yard, leaving only the front of the convent accessible to visitors. It was an expensive project that took months of labor by three masons and an apprentice. The wall was twelve feet high, topped with barbed wire, and the first time I saw it I wondered if the purpose was to keep intruders out or the nuns in. "Back in England we are a cloistered order," Sister Simeon explained. "The strict rules have been relaxed over here, but still we must follow the dictates of our mother superior back home."

Sister Simeon was a commanding presence. She was a woman around fifty, though the starched white wimple she and the other nuns wore made it difficult to determine age with any degree of accuracy. They dressed all in white, unlike the black-and-white habits of most Catholic nuns. All of them spoke with refined British accents which were a pleasure to hear. Of the seven besides Sister Simeon, all but two seemed younger. Sister Faith was seventy-two, as I learned when I treated her for a throat infection on one of my calls, and Sister Hope was probably in her mid sixties.

It was on my first visit to the convent of the Sisters of Saint George that I was introduced to the full congregation. "Sisters, this is Dr. Sam Hawthorne," Sister Simeon announced in the common room where they took their meals. It had been a simple dining room when old Bates lived there, and like the rest of the convent it was dimly lit.

"I'm pleased to be here," I told them with a smile. "Welcome to Northmont."

Sister Luke was upstairs in bed at the time, waiting out her final illness. It was Sister Simeon who introduced the others. "They have their more formal religious names, but since there are seven they have taken the names of the seven virtues during their stay here. This is the eldest, Sister Faith, then Sisters Hope, Charity and Fortitude. Over here are Sisters Temperance, Prudence, and Justice." She smiled and added, "Sister Justice is the tallest. She can reach all the top shelves." A couple of the others giggled at what was obviously a familiar joke.

"That makes it easy to remember," I said.

Little Sister Temperance, perhaps the most attractive of them, gave me a glowing smile and commented, "I pray you can keep us all in the best of health."

Except for the unavoidable death of Sister Luke, I did fairly well. When Sister Simeon phoned me on that August morning I assumed she was calling about a medical problem. "How's Sister Charity's allergy?" I asked. "We're into the hay-fever season now."

"It doesn't seem to be bothering her too much as yet," Sister Simeon assured me. "Actually, Doctor, I called about a different matter entirely. I've been pressing Mayor Stokes to let us bring a dozen or so

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children over from London to live at the convent. He seems reluctant for some reason. I was wondering if you could speak to him."

"Well, I can try. Tell me a little about this."

"They're starting to evacuate some women and children from the city, especially children. There's a feeling the bombing will only get worse. Our convent is large enough so we could easily accommodate twelve or fifteen girls, but we need some sort of zoning permission from the town. Mayor Stokes is afraid we might try to make nuns out of them."

"I'll speak to him," I promised.

"Thank you so much, Doctor."

The town council only held one meeting during the summer months, and it was just two days away. I knew I'd better present Sister Simeon's case to the mayor before that. Being mayor of a town like Northmont was only a part-time job at best, and Doug Stokes earned his living selling Ford automobiles. After I'd seen the day's last patient I told my nurse Mary Best that I was leaving early. Then I drove over to the local Ford dealership.

The dog days of August had settled over the automobile business and I found Northmont's mayor seated in his office with his feet up on the desk, enjoying one of his fine Havana cigars. "What brings you to this neck o' the woods, Doc? Thinking of trading in that Buick on a shiny new 1940 Ford?" He was a big man in his late thirties who'd played football in high school and never let anyone forget it. He always wore one of those hard straw hats during the summer months, the kind that started to yellow by Labor Day and had to be discarded, to be replaced the following spring.

I dropped into the only other chair in the tiny office. "Sister Simeon phoned me from the convent, Doug. She's concerned that you're trying to block her from bringing some English children over here."

His feet came off the desk and he took the cigar out of his mouth. "That's a tough one, Doc. The land is zoned for agriculture out there. We made an exception when the nuns came here two years ago, but now they're trying to turn it into a boarding school."

"They're doing no such thing! London and the other cities in the south of England have already been bombed. The nuns are trying to save at least a handful of children by evacuating them while there's still time."

Mayor Stokes looked unhappy. "I don't know, Doc. I talked to a few of the council members and they were against it. If the nuns don't teach them, they have to go to our schools. They're not like us here. They talk different, they act different."

"Perhaps more intelligent and civilized," I responded with a smile. "Maybe if they stay long enough to grow up in Northmont they'll even become customers of yours."

He thought about that. "Look, come to the council meeting on Thursday and tell it to the rest of them."

I readily agreed. "I will. And maybe I'll bring Sister Simeon along."

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Summer meetings of the town council were never very crowded, and this one was no exception. Sheriff Lens was there, seated in the back row. I knew he often dropped in on the meetings if he had no pressing business. I was greeting Mavis Baker, one of the two women council members, as Mayor Stokes called the session to order and went quickly through some routine agenda items. Then he took up the request of the Convent of Saint George to house up to fifteen teenage and preteen girls at the convent, said girls to be evacuees from London and other British cities. Someone mentioned zoning and asked if this was to be a school. I raised my hand and announced that Sister Simeon, the abbess of the convent, was present to address that issue. Though she'd been seated by my side in her white habit through the entire session, Mayor Stokes seemed taken by surprise.

"Ah, Sister Simeon! It's a pleasure to have you here! I know so little about your order. Are you Catholic nuns?"

"Anglican," she replied, remaining seated. "There are eight of us at the convent since the death of Sister Luke. We are all British, which is why we feel a special kinship with the children. We do not wish to convert any of them to our faith, though it is quite likely they are Church of England already. A certain amount of instruction in basic subjects would be given, of course, on an informal basis."

"But the space, Sister Simeon—"

"It is quite adequate. If you have your doubts, I would invite you and the other council members to tour our facilities."

There was a whispered conversation among the half-dozen men and two women who made up the town council. I could see that Mavis Baker, the only teacher on the council, especially supported the nuns, and finally it was agreed that Mayor Stokes would get his first look at the convent the following day, reporting back to the council for a final decision. Because I knew both parties quite well, Mrs. Baker suggested that I accompany Stokes and Sister Simeon on the following day's tour.

It seemed like a harmless enough request at the time.

Friday morning was warm and sunny, a perfect late summer's day in New England. A house call that took longer than expected made me late arriving at the convent on Town Line Road. It was a little after ten o'clock and Doug Stokes had already arrived. Going up the circular cinder driveway, I saw his car near the front door, its rear speckled by falling samara wings, seed spinners from a towering maple overhead. I parked right behind it as Sister Hope came out to meet me. She was a tall thin woman, one of the older nuns, who walked with a slight limp left over from a fall on the convent staircase. "You're just in time, Dr. Hawthorne," she said with a pleasant voice. "Sister Simeon and the others are just starting to show Mayor Stokes around. They're in the yard but the gate is locked so we'll have to go in through the house."

I followed her through the dim corridors and down the narrow, ill-lit

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steps to the back door. Out in the sunlit backyard, surrounded by the high wall, I could see the cluster of nuns surrounding Mayor Stokes, his familiar straw hat visible above their heads. He must have seen me too because I saw a flash of his blue suit as he raised a hand above his head and motioned for me to join them over by the wall.

I walked slowly so the limping Sister Hope could keep up with me, and I took her hand to guide her over the rougher parts of the yard. "You should have this rolled in the spring," I suggested, not unkindly. "It's quite bumpy."

"Oh, we're used to it."

As we approached the other nuns I became aware that Doug Stokes seemed no longer among them. "Where's the mayor?" I asked Sister Simeon.

"He's gone," she replied simply, and the others nodded in agreement.

"Gone? I saw him with you just seconds ago! Where could he have gone? The grounds are walled in!"

It was little Sister Temperance who seemed to answer for them. *"The lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door."*

Something had happened to Mayor Stokes and I had no idea what or how or why.

An hour later, as Sheriff Lens and his deputies searched the grounds of the convent, he brought me news of the first results. "We found Doug's skimmer, Doc. Want to take a look?"

The straw hat was there, all right, on the other side of the high wall. It lay upside down in some tall grass. There was no doubt it was the mayor's hat. The sweatband had his initials stamped in gold: *D. S.* for Douglas Stokes. "Looks like he climbed over the wall," the sheriff commented. "Or walked through it."

There was no other sign of him, and the rest of the grass seemed undisturbed. "I won't consider walking through it," I told him. "And climbing over it is an impossibility. Even with a boost from the good sisters he could barely have gotten a finger-hold on the top. There's barbed wire up there, and the grass around his straw hat seems undisturbed by the impact of a body landing. Remember, I saw him wave to me. I was walking right toward him and he never left that circle of nuns."

"But he did leave, Doc," Sheriff Lens insisted, "if we're to believe your story."

"You can believe it, every word of it."

The sheriff let out a sigh. "Where are the sisters?"

"Praying in their chapel."

"Let's go see."

The seven virtues, as we thought of them, were in two pews of the tiny chapel, added to the main house when the nuns moved there. An altar up front was available for visiting ecclesiastics, but at the moment it was serving Sister Simeon as she led them in prayer. The sheriff

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waited until she came to a pause and then he joined her at the front of the chapel. "Sisters, we have an unusual problem here. Doc says he saw Mayor Stokes with you in the convent yard, and then he just disappeared. My men found his straw hat on the other side of the wall but he couldn't have climbed over or walked through it. His car is still parked out front but he's nowhere to be found. I gotta have an explanation for all this."

Sister Simeon had bowed her head as if still in prayer, and it was Sister Charity who responded from the front pew. Her wrinkled face seemed painfully squeezed in the white wimple and I wondered fleetingly if the tight habit might somehow contribute to her allergy problems. "It was not the mayor who was with us," she said, "but only his spirit. What Dr. Hawthorne saw was but a shadow of a man already passed from us."

It was my turn to speak. "Are you trying to tell us the mayor is dead? I've never believed in ghosts, and I don't think a ghost drove his car out here."

Sister Simeon raised her head. "Mayor Stokes himself will tell us what happened, when the time comes."

Sheriff Lens laid a hand on my shoulder. "Come on, Doc. We won't learn anything here. Let's go check that wall again."

He was right, of course, and I followed him out of the little chapel. The Sisters of Saint George, if they knew anything, were not about to tell us until they were good and ready. Outside, we walked over to one of the deputies and listened to his negative report. Then we walked to the spot where the twelve-foot-high wall joined a front corner of the house, near the driveway where the mayor's car was still parked. There was a narrow iron gate in the wall at this point, allowing entry into the grounds without passing through the convent itself. The gate had been locked when the sheriff arrived, but Sister Simeon had quickly provided the key from the ring attached to her belt.

From this point Sheriff Lens and I walked along every inch of the lengthy wall, running our hands over the whitewashed bricks, pausing to examine every slight irregularity. "They know what happened to him," the sheriff said as we walked.

"Of course they know," I agreed. "But that only makes the problem all the more intriguing. What happened to him and why are they hiding the truth?"

He grunted, and we covered the rest of the wall in silence. Finally, satisfied there were no hidden doorways or secret exits, we gave it up. We'd circled the house to the front again and I walked over to peer into the mayor's coupe. The keys were still in the ignition. No one would lock their car while visiting a convent. I tried the motor and it turned over. Then I removed the keys and walked around to the rear of the coupe.

"What you gonna do, Doc?"

"Look in the rumble seat." I inserted the key and turned the handle,

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pulling it open. A small collection of maple spinners slid off the lid to the ground.

Whatever I'd expected or feared to find, it wasn't there. The compartment was empty. I relocked it and returned the key to the ignition.

"Let's go back into town," the sheriff decided. "I'll leave a couple of deputies here to search the fields, but Doug Stokes is probably sittin' in his office having a good laugh at all of us."

But Stokes wasn't at the dealership or his town-hall office. No one had seen him all day. The councilwoman, Mavis Baker, walked by as we were asking for him. "Wasn't he going out to inspect that convent today?" she asked.

"He was there," I confirmed, "but then he left."

"It's very important that we find him," Sheriff Lens told her. "If you see him, tell him to call Doc or me right away."

She gave him her sternest teacher's gaze. "I have a right to know what's going on."

I took over the conversation. Mavis and the sheriff had never gotten along. "Doug disappeared somehow out at the convent. I saw him in the yard near the wall. Then he was gone. There was no door, and he couldn't very well have walked through the wall."

Mavis Baker snorted. "If this is another of your locked-room things—"

"No locks, no rooms. Just a wall with an unfound door." I remembered the passage Sister Temperance had quoted.

"People do walk through walls," she said. "When I was in high school my parents took me to see the great Houdini perform in Boston. He walked through a wall."

"Onstage they can do it with trap doors," the sheriff told us. Mrs. Baker ignored him.

I still wasn't willing to believe that anything serious had happened to our missing mayor. The idea of the Sisters of Saint George conspiring to harm him in any way seemed out of the question. Yet when I remembered the cryptic words spoken by good Sister Temperance I wasn't so sure.

As we left the town hall Sheriff Lens said, "He'll turn up." But his voice lacked conviction.

"Your men searched the grounds, Sheriff. I think we'll have to search the convent itself."

"You mean go into their rooms?"

I nodded. "I'll drive back out there and speak with Sister Simeon. Give me a half-hour and then follow along. I think she'll let us do it without a search warrant."

It was Sister Fortitude, one of the younger nuns, whom I found in the front yard of the convent. She was watering the grass with a garden hose and when she saw me she spoke with a wonderful Scottish brogue. "The Lord has been stingy with water this summer, Dr. Hawthorne."

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"It's been a dry one," I agreed. "Is Sister Simeon around?"

"She may still be in the chapel."

I couldn't help noticing that Doug Stokes's car remained in the curving driveway by the front door. "Someone should call the mayor's brother about his car."

"Perhaps he will return and wonder where it is."

"Unless he's gone to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns."

Sister Fortitude smiled slightly. "Ah, Hamlet! It is good to speak with educated people. Do you really believe your mayor is dead?"

"I hope to find out. Right now I must speak with Sister Simeon." I left her and entered the convent.

Sister Prudence was on her hands and knees, scrubbing the staircase to the second floor. She gave me a weak smile, perhaps surprised to see an unescorted man in the building. "I'm looking for Sister Simeon. I was told she might be in the chapel."

The stocky Sister Prudence placed the scrub brush in her pail and came down to join me. "I'll show you the way."

"I hate to take you from your work. I know where it is."

"A break is good for me. Come."

Sister Simeon was just leaving the chapel as we approached. Perhaps she'd heard our voices. "Your second visit today, Dr. Hawthorne."

"There's still no sign of the mayor," I explained. "Sheriff Lens is coming back with a request to search your convent. I just wanted to inform you before he arrives."

"We have nothing to hide."

The sheriff arrived with five deputies and Mavis Baker, much to his dismay. Each was assigned a different portion of the convent to be searched, with one of the nuns acting as guide. When I returned to the walled-in yard where Doug Stokes had last been seen, I found that little Sister Temperance had been assigned to accompany me.

As we returned to the whitewashed wall, I said, "I've been wanting to ask you, Sister, about what you said earlier. About that unfound door."

She blushed a little. "It's from Thomas Wolfe. I found it at the beginning of his novel *Look Homeward, Angel.* Perhaps the unfound door leads to the afterlife. Since we were seeking a door in the wall that wasn't there, it seemed appropriate at the moment."

"You were out here with the mayor when it happened."

"We all were, except for Sister Hope. She was with you."

"Yes. But you must have seen something."

"He was here, and then he was gone," she said simply.

Sheriff Lens had come out of the convent, accompanied by Sister Simeon. "There's nothing in my section, Doc. Not a trace of Doug Stokes."

Sister Simeon spoke then. "I am quite concerned about this entire matter. As you know, Mayor Stokes came out here this morning to inspect our facilities before supporting our attempt to bring evacuated

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girls over from England. I believe he liked what he saw. I would hate to think our entire project might founder because he has disappeared."

"You were with him when it happened," Sheriff Lens reminded her.

"So was Dr. Hawthorne. He was within fifty feet of us."

"Sister, you must know what happened to him. There's no other possibility."

She smiled benevolently and said nothing.

The deputies and Mrs. Baker returned one by one, joining us with nothing to report. Mayor Stokes was not in the convent, alive or dead, and he was nowhere on the grounds. "He had plenty of time to get away," Mavis Baker pointed out, "while you were coming back to town looking for him."

"His car never left," Sheriff Lens replied, and of course he was right. The car still sat there, collecting its harvest of maple spinners from the overhead tree. Only the lid of the rumble seat that I'd opened earlier was free of the falling seeds.

"Mavis," I said, "you mentioned earlier that you saw Houdini walk through a wall once when you were young. Any idea how he did it?"

"Not the slightest," she admitted. "I was never good at figuring out magic tricks. I only remember he was surrounded by assistants wearing white smocks, caps, and eyeglasses. A screen was put up around him and when it was taken away he'd vanished. The group of assistants put up the screen on the other side of the wall and he reappeared. I never forgot it."

I remembered Stokes waving to me from that group of nuns. Perhaps he'd been beckoning me to join him on the other side of the wall.

I felt he was beckoning me once again as I walked to the driver's side of his car and removed the key from the ignition, just as I'd done earlier. "You looked in there already," Sheriff Lens reminded me as I walked to the rear and inserted the key in the rumble-seat lock.

It was Sister Simeon who saw me from the convent doorway and came running out to stop me. "No!" she warned. "Don't open it!"

But I already had, far enough to show us the crumpled body of Mayor Doug Stokes, a terrible deadly gash visible on his forehead.

"All right," Sheriff Lens demanded of Sister Simeon. "Which one of you killed him?"

She was staring at me as if she hadn't even heard his question. "You looked in there once," she said. "Why did you look again?"

"I looked a couple of hours ago. Those seeds are still spinning off the maple tree but there aren't any on the rumble-seat lid as there were before. I knew it had been opened again, quite recently."

Sheriff Lens moved to her side as if ready to grab her if she tried to escape. "How did he get through that wall, and which one of you killed him?"

"We'd better go inside," I suggested. "We can talk better there."

We sat in the parlor and as we talked the other Sisters of Saint

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George drifted in. Mavis Baker sat at the side of Sheriff Lens as I began to speak. "It was Mrs. Baker's account of Houdini's stage illusion of walking through a wall that told me how Doug Stokes disappeared. Onstage the white-coated assistants are the key to the trick. With so many of them milling around, one person more or less passes unnoticed. Houdini simply stepped behind that screen by the wall, pulled a white smock, cap, and glasses from a hidden pocket in the screen, and put them on. Then he mingled with the other identically dressed assistants."

Mavis Baker's mouth had dropped open as I spoke. "You mean Doug disguised himself as one of these nuns?"

I turned my attention to Sister Justice. "Do you want to tell us about it, Sister?"

The tall nun retreated a step under my gaze. "What do you mean?"

"Mayor Stokes had no possible motive for disguising himself as a nun, but you had a very good motive for disguising yourself as Mayor Stokes. I only caught the briefest glimpse of his straw hat and blue jacket and upraised arm, surrounded by all of you. As the tallest nun here, Sister Justice, it must have been you wearing that hat and jacket. In an instant the straw hat and the jacket came off and you were back to your true self. The jacket was easily hidden beneath one of the Sisters' habits."

"You wouldn't have noticed the quick change from fifty feet away?" the sheriff questioned.

"I was helping Sister Hope over the rough ground, because of her limp. When you're helping someone like that, you naturally look down several times. That's when the change took place."

"But why?"

"I think the plan was for Sister Justice, wearing the mayor's straw hat and jacket, to exit the grounds through the gate and go directly to the car. They hoped I would arrive late enough to see him driving away. I came late, but not late enough."

Sheriff Lens was frowning. "You're telling us the mayor was already dead at that time?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you. Doug's body was hidden somewhere, perhaps behind the chapel altar, and then moved to the rumble seat of his car while we were gone and the deputies were searching elsewhere. The nuns had seen us check the rumble seat earlier."

"Which one of them killed him, Doc?"

I sighed and shook my head. "Nobody killed Doug Stokes, Sheriff. I think while they were showing him around the convent, the worst thing that could possibly have happened to them did happen. He accidentally fell down the dimly lit convent stairs and killed himself. The Sisters were only trying to hide that fact."

It was Sister Simeon who came forward then. "You seem to know everything, Dr. Hawthorne. Your magic is greater than Houdini's."

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"Anyone who's been here knows that the place is dimly lit, especially the staircases. Sister Hope got her limp from falling down your stairs. For Mayor Stokes, who'd never been here before, it became a dangerous place. I'd guess that he fell on the front staircase to the second floor, perhaps on the way down, and cracked his head open on the first landing. That was where Sister Prudence was scrubbing this afternoon, no doubt trying to remove the last traces of blood."

"Why couldn't they have pushed him?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"For what purpose? He was here to pass judgment on the convent as a temporary home for girls evacuated from England, a project very dear to these nuns' hearts. No matter what he might have said, they would want no harm to come to him. If he fell on the stairs, it was an accident. They certainly wouldn't have gone through this elaborate charade if one of them had killed him."

"It was an accident," Sister Simeon confirmed. "He was leading the way down, and turned to speak with Sister Fortitude and me. He missed the step and couldn't grab the railing in time. When I heard his head hit, my body turned to ice."

I could almost feel it happening, and I knew what they must have gone through. "You saw the end of your dream then, shattered like his head. With the mayor accidentally killed while touring your convent, you'd never be allowed to bring the children here."

"We thought of them in the rubble of a bombed-out city," she said. "We knew we must do anything to hide how and where he'd died. I suppose we were a little crazy even to try this, but you were late arriving and we had to take the chance. We wanted to get the car away until you'd left, then bring it back for the body. We would have run it off the road to make it appear he'd died in a car accident." She raised her eyes to look at me. "It never would have worked."

"No."

"What will happen now?" old Sister Faith wanted to know.

"I guess that's up to the sheriff," I told her.

I wasn't a party to what followed, but no charges were brought against the nuns. Mavis Baker arranged for them to put the convent up for sale and move to a new home near Saratoga Springs in New York State. I heard later that they'd been successful in caring for a number of British girls there during the war years. And I suspect they never forgot Mayor Stokes in their prayers.

It was some days later, after Doug Stokes's funeral, when Sheriff Lens said to me, "There's one loose end in all of this business, Doc. How did Doug's straw hat get on the other side of that twelve-foot wall?"

"They don't call them skimmers for nothing, Sheriff. While I had my eyes on Sister Hope's feet, they just skimmed it over the wall." ●

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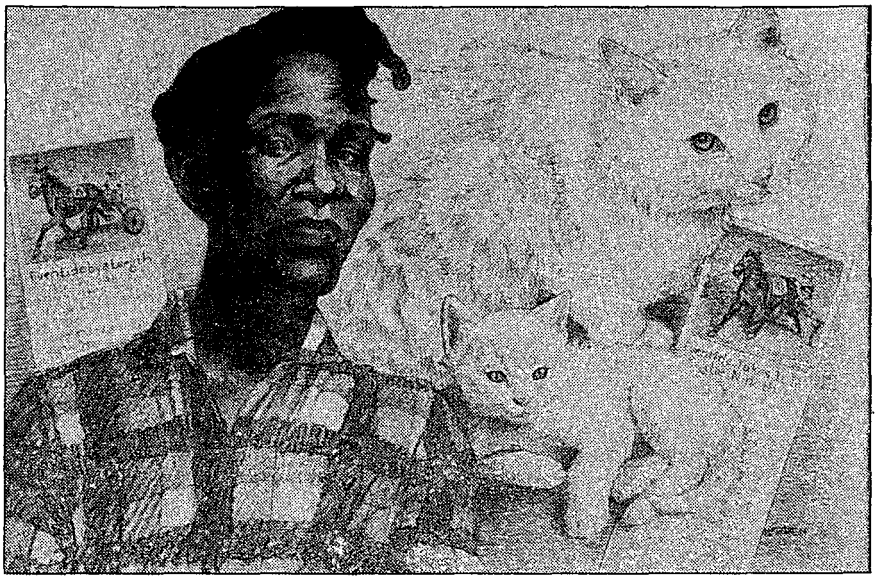

Art by Laurie Harden

DEATH AT EVENTIDE

by Kandis Elliot

A late-model red Pontiac rolled at a hesitant speed down the wind-swept country road. Cold April sunshine gleamed dully from the car's well-tended paint and chrome, now sullied by melt-water splashes and coughed-up grit from broken asphalt. The car hogged the center, for the road was barely wide enough to accommodate two cars passing abreast. Gravel shoulders were worn and trenched by many a tractor, hay wagon, and four-bottom plow forced to make room for approaching pickups and cars, which—unlike the Pontiac—were more often than not rusty and pitted from years of gravel showers. The Pontiac, its newness, its bright color contrasting with the gray of overwintered roadside weeds, seemed an alien thing to the dormant countryside; even its manner suggested the unsure caution of something up to no good invading an unsuspecting neighborhood.

On one side of the road, prairie stretched to the horizon. Occasional oak and shagbark hickory groves broke the swells of big bluestem and Indian grass. Wild lands held sway for the most part on the opposite side of the road as well, but a distant barn could be seen here and there amid sleeping agricultural fields. A quarter-mile ahead of the car, across from a roadside wood lot, stood an unpainted horse barn, out-

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buildings, and a ramshackle two-story house.

The red Pontiac picked up a little speed. As the car passed the gravel drive to the farmstead, the passenger-side window opened and ejected a black garbage bag. The car immediately sped away, tires shrieking on asphalt, spattering the still-airborne bag with grit.

Pink plastic tie fluttering, the bag hit the gravel shoulder, bounced, rolled over and down, and finally caught in old ditch cattails. Stems snapped and ripped at the black plastic; dry cattail heads exploded cottony fluff all around.

The bag did not come completely to rest. It undulated as it lay there until little balls of fluff, as white and nearly as substanceless as the cattail cotton, pushed through the rips and staggered out into the dead grass of an icy Wisconsin morning.

Though she is not unique in writing in more than one genre, Kandis Elliot may be the only writer today to employ the same series characters when she crosses from one field to another. Her Charles Farnsworth stories for *EQMM* are a continuation of a series she began for *Asimov's Science Fiction* in 1994. To date, five Farnsworth stories have appeared in *Asimov's;* this is his third outing for *EQMM*. ✝

Cousin Mike turned his collar up against the cold and peered through the woods toward Ma Loosiana's place. He couldn't see her house or barn through the acres of trees separating his little place on Earth from hers, but his head had automatically, like an animal's, turned toward the jarring sound of squealing tires. "What in thunder's Loosiana up to?" he muttered softly to himself. He listened to the departing car for some moments; although it had a good, quiet engine—a stranger's—he heard the car for over a mile. Often Mike could hear the Watertown Amtrak, twenty miles away, and, in season, the radios of tractor cabins when distant farmers worked the fields, sounds carried over the prairie like an intruding pluck of a great guitar string.

When stillness closed in, Cousin Mike looked around at the bare oaks and hickories, shivered, and put another chunk of wood on the stump. He split more than he needed, just to warm up. His breath condensed in the air and he wondered why calendar pictures of April always showed leafed-out trees and tulips and cherry blossoms. He'd never seen an April in Wisconsin that was any more than a March with longer days, with blizzards just as likely.

Mike piled half of his split wood onto a large tarp, then hauled the rest into his shack, a one-room plank building. It had been a henhouse for the little homestead that used to be on this side of the road, before

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the university took over the land and tore down all the buildings except this one and bulldozed the rubble into the ravine.

His Franklin stove took up nearly a quarter of the interior. The new pile of wood encroached on Mike's bed—layers of old blankets over a bench. A rack of nest boxes on a wall functioned as cupboards. One box held Mike's single plate, fork, and spoon, another a jar of straight matches, another was packed with shotgun shells for the 12-gauge stored on top of the rack. Other boxes held tins of beans, peaches, Spam: foods to be eaten from the can.

Cousin Mike stoked up embers in the Franklin, and, warm now, took the cardboard off his single window. A ray of cheerful light sifted through. Winter had been measured by layers of lacy frost opaquing the window, by cups of melted snow sprinkled with miserly pinches of instant coffee, and by the long cold hours of darkness he'd spent sleeping or staring without thought, his bony frame burrowed in his tangle of blankets.

He wondered what day it was. He checked his little feed-mill calendar, acquired last November when he'd loaded corn for farmer Zapatocny down the road. The mill hands had given him two, one for Zapatocny and one they said he could keep for himself, the generosity moving Mike to tears. The calendar was nailed on a wall and one page dutifully turned every month. He knew when to turn the pages by looking at an identical calendar in Ma Loosiana's horse barn and matching the pictures of snow scenes, or pasture scenes, or April scenes of blooming cherry trees. He'd tried more than once to X off each passing day to keep track, but he'd invariably forget to do it after a few days. Nevertheless, he got a sense of how much of each month was left by how long he'd been looking at the same picture, and now reckoned that April was about half over, and he had probably split his last woodpile for this year.

Mike went back outside and stared at the extra wood, heaped on the ragged hauling tarp. He'd thought to drag that wood over to Ma Loosiana's. But if the weather was going to warm, maybe she wouldn't need it anymore. Loosiana gave him extra when she'd bake too much bread or cookies, she let him tend her horses, she had him load grain at the feed mill in exchange for her going to the store to buy canned goods and ammo for him, because dealing with money more often than not meant trouble for Cousin Mike. He tried to repay her any way he could—a meal of rabbits or wild turkey, a mess of panfish, wood for her fieldstone fireplace.

But now it was spring. Mike looked indecisively at the woodpile on the tarp. A great horned owl hooted nearby and drew his attention to the barren crowns of craggy, ancient bur oaks surrounding his shack, to new box elders that had sprung up on the property after the destruction of the main house, to the distant sound of the door sliding shut on the horse barn yonder across the road. Softly Mike muttered, "Ol' owl shouldn't be a-hootin' in the middle 'a the day," but inside he wasn't

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really thinking about owls. He'd been looking forward to the giving of the wood. He'd been looking forward to seeing a face and hearing another voice.

Not that Mike could understand his isolation nor beweep his outcast state; such concepts were beyond his ken if not his lifestyle. He lived alone because that was the way things were. But that didn't mean he lacked a human animal's instinct for contact with his own kind, even at the most parsimonious and superficial of levels. That didn't mean he could not suffer loneliness.

Cousin Mike searched his yard for something his attenuated mind could not wholly contemplate: for the light of full awareness to succor him from the cold of yet another April day, in the spring of yet another desolate year.

And a light came.

Through a teary veil, Mike saw a cottony white glow in the woods. Hardly bigger than one of his old workgloves, it wavered toward him over the carpet of dry oak leaves and deep-cast shadows like a hopeful, tiny lantern.

Professor Charles D. Farnsworth was hopping on all fours around the crowded floor of his office when he heard a distinctive clomp-clomp of cowboy boots nearing his closed office door. At that same moment he espied a darting gray furball that circled around the claws of a twelve-meter mounted caiman, dodged behind seahorse aquariums to the bloated base of a ponytail palm, finally shot under the front legs of his old oak desk. With considerable agility Farnsworth hopped around to the back of the desk, shoved the chair aside, and swooped down on an Australian marsupial mouse, complete with teeth.

"Ow!—bloody hell—*don't open that door*—*!"*

The office door opened. The marsupial mouse made a beeline toward the offered escape. From under the desk Farnsworth saw the bottom half of two blue-jeaned and cowboy-booted legs straddling the doorway. The mouse ran on, unfazed. One boot lifted ominously.

"No! Don't stomp on my—*Ow!" Wham!* Farnsworth had jumped up in alarm, but, being still under his desk, managed to discover how wonderfully solid an oak desk he possessed.

Wham! The lifted boot came down on the equally solid floor with the sound of a cannon shot.

Farnsworth was still blinking sparklers from his vision when he focused on an upside-down pair of dark eyes examining his crumpled form.

"What the hell you doin' under there, Charley?"

Farnsworth worked himself to his feet. Rubbing his head, he looked back at the doorway. The floor seemed clean. "Tell me you missed her," he said.

"Missed 'er clean," the visitor said. "Getting slow in my middle age." The tall, lean man parked on an edge of the desk and opened his

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leather jacket, which he wore even in the August heat, revealing a badge pinned on his tan workshirt and a gunbelt circling his narrow hips. He waited while his host ascertained the emptiness of the hallway. "You want to catch mice, Charley, I know where to get a cat."

"*That* mouse is worth eight hundred dollars, thank you, and I want her back with all her parts intact." Farnsworth sucked red dribbles from a fingertip and dropped into his chair. "She's a Dasyurid with eighteen embryos in her pouch, and about to be progenitor of an entire colony of invaluable medical research specimens. Sam, don't give me that look. That beastie and half her offspring carry genes for a protein which might be the answer to any number of neurological syndromes, Parkinson's and Lou Gehrig's Disease among them." He had seen the disapproval on his guest's face at the mention of "research specimens." Animal Rights activists had brainwashed even redneck colonists with their smear propaganda. Farnsworth would have thought *this* redneck immune to such rhetoric. Sam Jones had been sheriff of Dodge County for over a decade; he'd seen more than his share of real cruelty—to humans and animals both.

The sheriff raised a long eyebrow. The man had a captivating face, not classically handsome, Farnsworth considered, in the way his was, of course, but expressively so, with dark broody eyes overshadowed with long, fierce brows across a wide forehead, and a demeanor that could tell you to get out of the car and you did so at once and with your hands in plain sight, but in the same tone could also console a lost kid with a sincerity that made the kid prefer to cling to Sheriff Sam even after gushing parents arrived on the scene. "Eight-hundred-dollar mouse, eh?" he said. "Well, I got me a million-dollar tomcat needs looking into. Figgered I'd enlist the services of this university's world *re*-nowned zoologist."

"Which brings you to my door," Farnsworth nodded agreeably, then eyed sore-looking scratches at the sheriff's hairline and across one angular cheek. "You sure this is a cat? Not a Siberian tiger? Or jealous ex-girlfriend? I believe you have more than your share, Sam."

An eyebrow went up again. "No more'n you, I reckon." The sheriff delicately fingered the scratches. "Wasn't no cat, Charley. No babe, either. Man did this."

"A man?"

"Friend 'a yours, he claims. You know a Mister Mikal Lukovitch Branonkowsky? Better known as—"

"Cousin Mike," Farnsworth moaned. "Good Lord, what's he done?"

"Says you the one let him stay in that henhouse in the preserve. In the woods across from that ol' black gal's place, that New Orleans transplant, on County Trunk M. I recall you been itchin' to get your paws on her place some time now."

"I thought Mike'd have frozen to death years ago," Farnsworth admitted. He'd been new to the job of overseeing the Dodge County Wildlife Preserve back then; he'd been new to farm-folk ways, new to Wisconsin,

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and new to America, with the dew of Oxford and England still fresh on his brow. He'd hardly learned the language when job duties sent him out to evict lost souls like Cousin Mike from land annexations to the preserve. For insurance reasons, existing structures on bought-out farmsteads had to be torn down before prairie and forest restoration began. Even today, struggling farmers on the periphery of the accruing preserve, the largest single unit of unbroken wilderness west of the Everglades, looked on Professor Charles D. Farnsworth as a tree-hugging demon with buy-out money in one hand, a wrecking ball in the other. Farnsworth had grown calloused to it, more or less. The family farms he'd purchased for the state were losing concerns in an era of agricultural megacomplexes, and their ex-owners had been spared, generously so, the pain of a bankruptcy auction. "He was a special case," Farnsworth explained. "He was already living in that little shack. Had it fixed up quite cozy for himself. I could see that it wasn't a simple matter of relocation. Or in his case, institutionalization."

The sheriff's broody gaze narrowed. "He get after you with that twelve-gauge, did he?"

Farnsworth squirmed at the memory. "I made discreet inquiries. Seems the locals kept an eye out for his welfare, odd jobs, groceries, and the like. We'd already planned to let the woods regenerate itself naturally—nasty little ravine running through the lot; whole area is too rocky to do anything else with. It seemed to me that any further disruption of the poor sod's life was hardly necessary." Farnsworth still cringed at the memory of a man begging him not to disrupt even that miserable existence. "So I let him stay." He flicked an eye at the sheriff. "The, ah, preserve advocacy has not been advised of this piddling bit of trespass, you understand."

Sam nodded. "And you told him to come to you if he had any problems."

Farnsworth squirmed again.

"Well, he's got a problem. He's at war with the lady across the road. They had some words and she called me up to have him evicted. Seems nobody told *me* about how kindly certain world-famous zoologists treat our local bums. He come after me with the shotgun, then thought better of it, then just plain come after me." The sheriff tapped his scratched face. "Fought like a damn bobcat when I tried to haul him outta there. His caterwauling brings the neighbor lady over, and before I know it I got *two* crazies screechin' up a storm. And that's when I find out what's really at the root 'a all this." Theatrical pause.

"Well, *what?"*

"Cats. Or like I said: the million-dollar tomcat."

"Million'—Cousin *Mike?"*

"So he claims. From a bag pitched outta a car last spring. But cats is animals, and that's your bailiwick, Charley. And he's *there* because 'a you, too. And it's *your* blasted wildlife preserve—"

"It's a state and university conjoint—"

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"—So I figger this is as much *your* problem as mine, and I want you to go out there and get this dang mess straightened out before someone gets hurt."

Then the sheriff of Dodge County gave him that you-say-yessir-or-else look, and before he knew it, Charles Farnsworth was reaching for his field jacket.

"Uh din wan no trouble. Uh keeps a' eye out fer him years now. Dadgum winters y' all gots up here, like to freeze a body to—shuddup, Gook—uh bakes a' extry bread, uh makes a' extry batch o' chitters, now here he up and theeves me and mine, jus' up and takes, and me lettin' him chore fo' me and all. P'fessor, uh knows whut it like, be po' and shit on. So uh keeps a' eye—shud *up,* Gook—das gradytood, ain't it? Izzat gradytood? But de cat be mine, and he knows it, and now you knows it, and by Ga, either uh gets it back or he goes to de hoosegow. You hearin' me?—Gook, you hush now, dadgummit!"

The yelping Sheltie-mix reluctantly quieted. Farnsworth looked down at a face as brown and wrinkled as pecan meats and gave up trying to read Ma Loosiana's lips. It had taken months to get the hang of Wisconsinese. He briefly recalled an operator-assisted call to Baton Rouge. He'd sworn he dialed the wrong country.

The worst problem with bad English was that it invariably made Farnsworth more ponderously British than usual. "Madam, if I am to be of service to you so as to facilitate a happy outcome, I need you to elaborate on the circumstances under which this fellow absconded with this priceless felid. Just to take it like that, well, it's not cricket. Surely you told him it was just not on? So if you please, ma'am."

Loosiana, who stood as high as Farnsworth's lowest rib even in her thick-soled work boots, squinted as though he'd blathered Cantonese. A trickle of sweat eked down from under her blaze-orange hunting hat, which seemed far too warm for the stifling August day. She crossed bare arms over a gauzy work shirt that hung on her ninety-some pound frame like a sack. "Say whut?"

He tried again. "Missus—er—Louisiana, do you have proof of ownership? Any papers of pedigree?" He concentrated with all his might, and gradually managed to decipher meaning from her soft Deep South replies.

"Papers! They was a gift from God," she explained carefully, as if to an idiot. "His'n, and the one I got left—you can see 'er yonder. Come on." Woman and yard dog marched him up the gravel drive and into the shadows of an open horse barn. Several pans with milk dregs laced with drowned flies sat on the ground by the door. He noted two horses and a pony in the iron-railed box stalls within. Farm plugs, he thought, but then his gaze pulled back for a second look. "I say! Those two appear to have had quite a bloodline."

The old lady turned and narrowed an eye. "What you know 'bout hosses?"

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"Madam, my polo team won the Godfrey's Cup in every term. And," Farnsworth added, trying unsuccessfully to maintain a modicum of modesty, "at the King's Head I am rather known in the running of the hounds." He studied the tall bay horse. Incredibly old, its hide draped protruding bones, but its remaining anima held a glow of once-splendid quality. "Standard-bred, is he? Makings of quite a harness racer."

"You don' say." Loosiana scowled at the bay. "Po' aw' bastard spent twenny years pullin' a honey wagon at Arlington. Got him fer a load 'a wheat straw. Bought her—" she thumbed at the crippled gray in the opposite stall— "fer ten dollars on her way to the mink-food factory." Despite the mare's lameness, evidently a result of the ill-tended injuries that scarred her front knees, Farnsworth could see the same blood of greatness as in the bony bay. Loosiana indicated the pony, a well-mannered little Welsh with a horrible, gouging scar disfiguring a hindquarter. "Slug shot by deer hunters," she explained, and tapped her bright hat that seemed luminescent in the dim barn. "Always wear it. Hunting season, I put on the whole dang suit."

"Hunting is not allowed in or within a mile of the preserve. Your property's five steps from the boundary."

"Yessuh. Jus' you don't come out here in deer season wearing them duds—" she waggled fingers at Farnsworth's earthy tweeds— "or you be tagged, gutted 'n strapped to a' Illynoise fender 'fore you knows it. Ga, I hates hunting season. I hates winter even more. Only thing 'bout winter is y'all gots no gaters." She sent Farnsworth an accusatory look. "Damn vyermentalists down in Loosiana got so's to lovey-dovin' gaters and now Nawlins young'uns getting snapped up in they own backyards. Look here—" She raised a droopy pantleg to show a calf at least as mutilated as the pony's rump. "Ain't never gonna live in gater country no more, no matter how damn cold I gets in winter. Better cold than et. But we talkin' cats now. Look here."

In an empty stall, several tabbies lazed in a bed of straw; among them sat a fluffy white cat washing its face. "This 'un and six jus' like 'er was tossed in my driveway last spring. City bastards toss kittens and puppies out'n the country all the time. No sense to fix they pets. Just toss 'em out the winder by a farm and think they gets a good life—them what ain't kilt or crippled or starved or froze afore someone like me finds 'em. Six still alive when I finds this mess."

Farnsworth eyed the salvaged feline. "Here, puss, puss, puss," he called.

"Waste 'a breath, P'fessor. Jewbitch deaf as a post."

"'Jewbitch'?"

The old black face grinned a nearly toothless, cynical grin. "That 'un's Wetback. That's Faggot, over there's Yankee. She's Dago, an' that handsome feller—" she pointed to a glossy ebony monster— "that's Nigger." She awaited his response with an indecipherable expression. "Mike's got Honky."

Farnsworth did not comment on the names. He knelt down, pushed

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the jealous Sheltie—Gook—away, and patted the white cat's soft head, measuring her against what he knew of breed standards. Her long coat was gossamer soft and shiny, more like silk than cat hair, the pure white, flowing mane and bootkins very uncatlike, her tail a wonderful plume. Her legs were quite long and, though petite, she stood taller than cats twice her weight. Her eyes were pale blue. Because of that, Farnsworth knew, her untwitching ears were stone deaf.

"You said there were six kittens alive in the bag. What happened to the rest?"

For the first time, the old woman's fierce gaze faltered. "Don't know. Four of 'em just up 'n vanished, one after 'tother. In a week, Jewbitch the only one, so's I keep her shut in the barn. Might be a mink got 'em. Local kids might'a used 'em for target practice. Seen them bastards wipe out my whole flock 'a Pekins on the river, just 'cause tame ducks be easy shots."

Farnsworth could see she was stung for having lost her rescued orphans. "Well, that makes five. What happened to the sixth?"

"That's Honky."

"And when did Mike steal it?"

"Never said Mike stole it. I just seen it over there and could tell right off it be one 'a the bag litter. They's all the same."

"Are you saying Mike didn't actually take the cat from you?"

"When I got to 'em, they was wandering over everywhere, up the house, up the road, all over hell 'n gone. One got all the way over to Mike's, is all. But they got flung in my ditch right there—" through the open windows she pointed down the hill to the road, where a stand of green ditch cattails were just starting to head out, "and that made 'em mine, right there."

Irrefutable logic. Farnsworth sighed and looked forlornly at the white cat that could not hear her own purring. "You said Mike's is identical to this? Why do you want his cat when you already have one like it? And a goodly lot more, I must say."

"Ain't she a purty kitty?"

"Well, quite, but—"

"Don't matter she can't hear. People gonna pay big money for cats like this."

Aha. Farnsworth got the picture. "You plan on breeding this cat to Mike's tom."

"*My* tom! They all was gifts 'a God—to me—throwed out by some damn bastard didn't want 'em no more'n a sack a garbage."

Farnsworth gathered himself. "Isn't it possible that God guided one kitten over to Mike as a gift for him?" Her eyes blazed at the suggestion. "Madam, deafness is a prevalent genetic flaw in certain white mammals. The gene that produces hair and iris pigment is also involved in the early development of the inner ear." He paused to consider that Ma Loosiana no doubt lacked understanding of genes and phylogeny. "Mating this cat to her sibling might surface more defects.

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Even deafness will make the progeny worthless from a professional pet breeder's standpoint, no matter how striking the individual animals may be."

"This 'un here's already knocked up by one 'a them barn toms." Louisiana made a sour face at the white female, which was indeed pudging up in a distinctive manner. "But Mister Kranzenchoff—he run the Hair Hide Horns 'n Tallow pet store in Madison—he done offered one hundred dollars for the tomcat. Mike hauled the dang cat everywhere till Kranzenchoff saw it up t' feed mill. So I ain't just daydreamin' here. I get me a cattery goin' and make these here fuzzy long-legged white devils get so to breed true, why, they's gone be a million dollars in it."

Farnsworth rubbed his eyes. They were right across the road from each other; for all anyone knew, cat incest could have already occurred. "Shall we wait and see what the kittens are like?" He rejected a short lecture on back-breeding. "Perhaps then you could offer a stud fee."

"Stud fee? Fer my *own cat?* Look, P'fessor," the old woman said, "Mike sell that tomcat, them moneys gone be stole from him 'fore he leave town. You get that cat over here. I make sure Mike taken care 'a. You got my word."

That, he supposed, was all he could hope for.

They went back through the barn, where Farnsworth again admired the ruined horses. Properly trained, the bay surely could have been an outstanding trotter in his heyday. What a waste.

The old woman watched his admiration of the horse. "He Dum-Dum," she said. "Name him for Mike."

Charles Farnsworth took a moment to remember where the appropriated henhouse had stood, then crossed the road and headed into the woodlot opposing Ma Loosiana's equine retirement home and cat-breeding ranch. He was mildly surprised at how overgrown the area had become. Saplings encroached on the twelve-by-twelve-foot outbuilding, seemingly far too small to have housed a human being for God knew how many years. The rocky ravine below the once-open farmyard could no longer be seen past brush and brambles along its lip.

The shack's door stood open. "Cousin Mike," he called. Bright oak leaves rustled peacefully in the overhead breeze. "Mike, it's Professor Charles Farnsworth, from the university. Remember me?"

A thicket of bladdernuts and blackberry brambles issued forth a skeletal hermit clutching a white wad of fur and a shotgun. A high tenor asked tentatively, "That really you, 'Fessor Charley?"

A few reassurances later, Mike was seated on a log-splitting stump, with Farnsworth on an upturned pail beside him.

"He's truly admirable, Mike." Farnsworth stroked the cat's white fur. The blue-eyed tom was twice his sister's heft and height. His long legs gave him the look of a miniature cheetah, draped with glistening angel hair. An apt description, according to his doting master.

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"He came to me like 'a angel, 'Fessor Charley. I thought he was a little ball 'a heavenly light at first. That's what I called him, too. Angel. Until Ma Loosiana told me his real name."

"Honky?"

"Uh-huh. She'd know. She's real smart."

"You like the names she gives her animals?"

"Why not?" He picked up the cat by its armpits. It dangled complacently, either accustomed or hardened to Mike's awkward gestures of loving possession.

"Mike, do you know what 'honky' means?"

"Honky-dory. Ain't that just what he is, now?" He lifted the cat to the sun. The animal seemed to revel in the attention, although its ears twitched constantly toward the rustling of squirrels and birds in the trees. A chipmunk scolding under the shack drew its attention immediately. The fact of its excellent hearing was not lost on Farnsworth. The cat was truly spectacular, a splendid candidate for founding a new breed.

Almost reluctantly, Mike gave his pet over for inspection again. Farnsworth fussed with it a moment while surreptitiously studying his host. Cousin Mike had aged considerably, and Farnsworth mentally kicked himself for not monitoring the retarded man more conscientiously—or bringing a case of groceries along. The grizzled hair seemed groomed at rare intervals. Mike had no beard, nor could he sprout one; small-town notions of eugenics had seen to that. The etching of deep frostbite traced over the leathery face. Peeling fingertips also bespoke long, below-zero winter nights, and Farnsworth suspected that the man's toes, hidden in boots cast off from someone with feet a lot bigger than Mike's, were in similar or worse shape. Cracked, yellow nails looked ragged enough to rend a man's face nastily. Nevertheless, Mike's clear eyes held a simple happiness that had become quite rare in the world beyond. Farnsworth perceived that inner cheer all the more for watching it abruptly fade from Mike's trusting gaze.

" 'Fessor Charley, you ain't gonna let Sheriff Sam take me away, are you?"

"No. It was all a mistake, Mike. Missus Louisiana was afraid you were going to sell Honky to a pet store."

Mike took a moment to digest this revelation. At last unveiled relief emblazoned his worn features. "Oh. Oh, she don't gotta worry. I ain't never gonna sell ol' Honk. You can bet on that."

Farnsworth was sure he could.

"Oh no. I tol' Mister Kranzenchoff. Honky, he's the only friend I got."

"I'm your friend, Mike."

Mike squirmed. "Oh, sure, 'Fessor. I know that. But—" *But you aren't here at night, and you aren't here when I'm hungry and alone, and you just aren't here, except for ten minutes right now.* "But Honky's my friend, and I tol' Mister Kranzenchoff. I was afraid he might steal him. That's when I went up and tol' Ma Loosiana 'bout that, so she'd know if

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he come around asking." Mike considered a moment. "That's when she tol' me I gotta keep Honky up to her place. But I couldn't. And I don't think Honk woulda stayed there anyhow. All the other angel cats, 'cept Jewbitch, flew away, and—"

Farnsworth straightened. "Flew away?"

Mike looked right and left and leaned forward. Conspiratorially he whispered, "I seen 'em. Just at dark. Same week they come, one day I was going up t' the horse barn for to give the horses new water for the night—freezes up, you know—and there I saw one little white kitty sail right up into the sky."

Farnsworth tried to curb his puzzlement. Had Mike discovered that wild marijuana out on the prairie? "How, uh, did the cat, uh—?"

"Well, I don't know, 'Fessor. One minute it was a-settin' there by the corral fence, the next it just floated up over the barn. Next night I saw another'n—" a crooked finger pointed straight up— "go right on over. It was near dark, but I knew what it was. Looked like a little light, just like Honky here did when he first come to me." He blinked worriedly at Farnsworth's expression. "I only saw them two fly off. Ma Loosiana, she thinks maybe kids stole 'em or someone run over 'em or something, but I think all four went like that. The way I figger it, see, me and Ma Loosiana, we were supposed to only get one each. I got the Honk, she got the Jewbitch. The others were meant for someone else."

Farnsworth searched for some way to delve a little deeper into this, but gave up. Meteorites, will-o'-the-wisps—who'd ever know what Mike really saw? There were more weighty considerations to deal with, not the least of which was the fact that Honky had potential to be Mike's guardian angel indeed. Maybe not a million-dollar cat, but one that could put a few more meals in his master's belly. "Mike—now, don't let this scare you—but you like Honky a lot, I can see that."

Mike was immediately scared. "Sure I do." He grabbed the cat and hugged it securely.

"Don't you think other people might like a nice kitty like him?"

"Yeah . . ." Suspicion.

"People might pay a lot of money for such a cat. It doesn't have to be an, uh, angel cat. Just one with pretty fur and eyes. People like long-haired cats of any color."

"Yeah . . ."

"Well, ah, if you were to let Honky visit the farm cats every now and then, just to, ah—" Farnsworth cleared his throat. Perhaps he himself could oversee the operation, donate some fancy Persians, insure that sound biological principles were applied. . . . How to get this through to Mike's limited faculties?

But the cracked lips split in a comprehending grin. "Oh, I getcha, 'Fessor! But ol' Honky, he's way ahead 'a you." He turned to the shack and called a high-pitched *kitty-kitty-kitty*. The head of the ugliest cat Farnsworth had ever seen poked from the open door. Then the rest of the mottled, scraggy, brown-gray-yellow—and slightly pudgy—body

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sauntered over to its caller. Mike gave it a pat. "One 'a Zapatocny's barn cats. She been coming round to my garbage pile for years. Honk screwed her good the end 'a July. Any 'a her kittens look anywhere near like Honky-Dory—" he lifted the big white tom to the sun again, "we're gonna make us a million dollars, yes *sir!*"

Leaves fell in red and yellow blizzards over the University of Wisconsin campus. Charles D. Farnsworth watched them through his office windows; only six weeks ago it had been tropical summer. Wisconsin seasons changed so swiftly, it seemed the state secretly moved itself along its eighty-ninth meridian twice a year, in one week jumping south of the Tropic of Cancer for a bug-filled summer stay of three months, then for the other nine months twanging back above the Arctic Circle, with an explosive spring and autumn in between.

Behind him, cowboy boots clomp-clomped around his office floor, restless pacing around cabinets, specimen tanks, the computer workstation, mounted exotica from the world over. "Careful of—"

"Ooof—" *Clomp!*

"—that Komodo dragon, Sam. Tail's lined with iron reinforcing rod." He turned back to his desk and removed the cozy from his steaming teapot. His guest finally took a chair and Farnsworth shoved a cup of tea his way. "Milk? Sugar?"

Sam Jones eyed the cup without touching it. "Got any Jack Daniels?"

"Allow yourself momentary transcendence into an evolved and civil being." Farnsworth took milk for himself. "Kittens," he sighed. Peace had reigned since he'd negotiated shared tomcat-custody and conjugal visitation. The spurious litters had been born on nearly the same day, six weeks ago. "Surely you're not going to disrupt the life of an unfortunate soul over nine wee kittens."

"His life's already disrupted, Charley. And when I seen 'em yesterday the count was down to six."

"Six? Total?"

"Hers dropped a half-dozen all by itself. She said two of 'em disappeared—"

"She blames Mike?"

"Said she didn't know what happened to 'em, but I think she just let 'em get stepped on by a horse. Kittens gotta be lucky to make it on a farm, especially they ain't wanted. Loosiana was real sour, none 'a hers were white. Two black and the rest spotty, what you call calico. That ratty-ass female Mike kept around hatched three, all of 'em pure white."

"Yes. Dominant genes." But a more surprising thought struck Farnsworth: the Louisiana he'd met this summer would not let animals die through neglect, no matter what color they were.

The sheriff still eyed his tea. "Pretty little farts. Long hair, blue eyes, just like the daddy. When one 'a them turned up missing, Mike went up to the farm with the shotgun."

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Farnsworth groaned.

"Said he wasn't going after Ma Loosiana, thought it might be the pet-store guy from Madison run off with the kitten. But you gotta know, Charley, I won't have him out there if he scares her. Old gal's had more'n her share 'a trouble. White kids—and I wouldn't doubt their folks give 'em the idea—done some mean stuff till they learned they wasn't going to drive her back to New Orleans. Spray paint, lettin' the livestock out, that kinda crap. And she tells me the university's harassing her about selling out to the preserve again." The sheriff sent Farnsworth one of those long-browed, maddened-Neanderthal looks which had kept many a wayward teen from straying off the path of righteousness a second time.

"Oh, tut-tut. The preserve adjutant's office sends out form letters from time to time. Just a reminder to the periphery landowners that they can give a gift to wildlife, etcetera. It's not harassment, it's junk mail. Did you talk to the proprietor, what's his name, of the pet store, what's its name?"

"Bill Kranzenchoff. The Hair Hide Horns 'n Tallow. Yeah. He likes Mike's tomcat, too, it seems. But he don't like it enough to go out and get shot for it."

"Not even a million-dollar tomcat?"

Sam Jones paused for a moment. He finally took his cup of tea, drained it in a gulp, and sat back in his chair. "That cat really worth a million dollars?"

"In the hands of a knowledgeable breeder, he could be worth a sizeable chunk of money. The beast manifests a serendipitous collection of clearly desirable genes. If they could outbreed to a stable line that was certifiable by cat-fancier associations, they could make a nice livelihood selling pricey fancy pets. Pedigree kittens and puppies fetch anywhere from a few hundred dollars up to thousands." Farnsworth watched that conjecture rattle around Sam's lawman brain for a moment and found he liked the sheriff's new expression even less than the previous. "What is it?" he asked.

Sam narrowed an eye. "Loosiana's cat worth that much, too?"

"No. It has an undesirable trait for deafness. And females can't reproduce fast enough to establish a paying breed. She'd be worth something, but only in conjunction with the male. But that's not what's bothering you."

Sam jumped up and resumed pacing, this time watching his feet. "Hell, we might as well give Cousin Mike a diamond necklace, or a brand-new Harley, or maybe even that million dollars, in cash. Don't take it wrong, Charley, but you know and I know that anything valuable is just gonna bring trouble down on that half-wit's head. Best thing we could do is go out and castrate that damn tomcat."

Farnsworth rolled his eyes heavenward. "Let's first deal with the petty theft business, shall we? Pity's sake, it's only one blasted kitten." And then an echo of his earlier misgiving tapped at the back of his

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mind. *Actually it's*—he made the tally again—*three kittens. Stolen. Vanished. Something.*

And then another memory surfaced: *Four of 'em up 'n vanished, one after t'other in a week.* Farnsworth sipped his tea and frowned. Cats had been vanishing out there long before anyone considered them valuable. Of course, the world was not overrun with cats, and neither were Wisconsin farms. Mortality was high for small animals living among hooves and highways. Nonetheless—

He abruptly found himself quite keen to go out and deal with cats again.

The crunch, clatter, and wheeze of the Zoology Department field vehicle elicited no yelping dog nor elderly New Orleans horse wrangler. Charles Farnsworth got out and surveyed a strangely quiet farmyard. He called Ma Loosiana's name several times, receiving only whinnies from the stabled horses. When knocks on the farmhouse door brought no response, he headed up to the barn.

A cardboard box had been added to the empty stall; in it was the white mother cat, nursing three kittens just at the tottering age. Farnsworth frowned; yesterday Sam Jones had seen four kittens here. Two of the remaining trio were black, but one was white with ginger patches. Farnsworth eyed a straw-bale gathering of Ma Loosiana's other cats, noting that the resident toms were ginger and black, respectively. "Jewbitch, you tart," he said to the mother cat, chucking her under her chin. She miaowed loudly and got up, dumping the kittens. When he turned to look elsewhere for the old lady, the white cat and the others in the barn raced ahead to their empty food pans by the door.

Farnsworth blinked at the pans. Abruptly he went back and checked the horse stalls. The bony bay, the crippled mare, and the pony all nickered and sniffed at him, ears pricked and expectant. Odd, he thought, that she hadn't let them out for a sun-and-run. Their stalls had not been mucked out that morning. Their mangers and waterers were empty. *Something definitely amiss here.*

He went back to the open door and cupped his hands to his mouth. "Gook! Gook, here, boy!" he yelled over and over. No possessive little yard dog came to oversee his inspection of the other animals this time.

Maybe she's over at Cousin Mike's, he thought, even as he trotted to the house. He was prepared to shoulder the door open, but it was unlocked and, as at all farmhouses, opened to the kitchen. Inside was an antique gas stove, a sink with a hand pump, ladle, and bucket, and an old cherrywood table under a red-and-white-checked vinyl cloth. A refrigerator-freezer hummed in a corner. Platters of various baked goods covered the tabletop, along with a dozen loaves of bread. The room held a fading aroma of a day's baking—yesterday's.

The rest of the house was also spartan and utilitarian. Its sole decorations covered a dining room wall, papered with yellowed, framed newspaper clips and photos of harness horses. The main nods to the

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twentieth century were electricity, a modern bathroom with a tub fenced by bottles of bubblebath, and a telephone.

He eyed the telephone, then left the house and headed across the road through the woodlot.

The shack's door was wide open. In another cardboard box lay the ugly cat, nursing one kitten—an angel kitten, with fur of gossamer silk, legs like a little cheetah's, eyes as blue as September's noontime sky above. The mother cat jumped up and miaowed piteously as Farnsworth hurriedly checked the shack's contents.

"I thought you were supposed to have two left," he said to the cat, noting with relief that the shotgun was still in residence, on top of a rack of nest boxes full of canned goods. He could smell gunpower. The cat yowled louder. Honky was nowhere to be seen, but, Farnsworth suspected, that was because Cousin Mike was nowhere to be seen. A plastic bag containing a loaf of fresh-baked bread and an assortment of pastries lay on the bed. He tore off a piece of bread and tossed it to the hungry animal, then ran outside.

"Mike!" he bawled. "Mike, it's your friend Charley—" Farnsworth grimaced; he never thought he'd hear that damned nickname from his own lips— "Mike, come out. It'll be okay—"

A dog barked in the near distance: an oddly echoing sound, as though from the bottom of a well. Farnsworth knew at once where it was coming from.

The ravine wasn't more than twenty feet deep and its wide, flat limestone outcroppings were easily navigated to the bottom. Not a dangerous cliff; more like a stone ditch. Ma Loosiana lay on a flat mossy slab halfway down. Farnsworth reached her in seconds, pushed away the protecting, whining Sheltie, and put fingers to her throat. The angle of her neck told him not to expect a pulse, and there wasn't one. She was stiff and cold, her old work shirt and bib overalls still damp from overnight dew in the shaded ravine. Blood, gouged from long scratches down her forehead, was smeared where the dog had licked at her, trying in vain to rouse his mistress.

"I didn't do it, 'Fessor Charley. I didn't do it—" Cousin Mike sniveled through an unstoppable flow of tears as he cowered behind bars in the Dodge County lockup. "I didn't do it, Sheriff Sam—" The red-rimmed eyes glanced up at Sam Jones for only a second before ducking to hide in calloused, dirt-crusted hands.

"Mike, listen," Farnsworth soothed, "tell me what happened yesterday. You talked with Louisiana. You talked with Sheriff Sam. Then what happened?"

"We really should have the social worker and a lawyer in here, Charley," Sam muttered.

"Consider me his guardian. Mike, talk to me. After Sheriff Sam left. What did you do?"

"I didn't do nothing," Mike howled. "I just went home. I played with

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the kitties and I was still a little mad that Ma Loosiana stole one of 'em, but—"

"How'd you know that?" said the sheriff in That Tone, making both Mike and Farnsworth cringe.

"Sam, please—"

Mike bolstered himself. "Hers weren't white, and mine were, and that's what she wanted." He sent the lawman a defiant look that instantly wilted. He turned to Farnsworth. "I got to thinking. It was okay she take one. She done so much for me, I didn't care. I got to thinking I shoulda brought one up so she didn't had t' come down t' woods. Then I thought what else could I do nice for her, and so I went out coon huntin'. Loosiana likes coon. Fixes 'em Nawlins style."

"This was last night? You were out hunting?"

"Yeah. Didn't get one, though. Shot at one. Big'un up a tree, but I lost him 'cause it was gettin' too dark. Don't got no flashlight." The cracked lip curled in a pout. "When I got back, I seen she come an' took another kitty."

Farnsworth shared a look with Sam Jones. The twelve-gauge had been recently fired. Loosiana died of a broken neck, but it would have taken some coercion to force her down to the ravine. She'd been alive when she hit limestone headfirst, without even the cushion of her old, thick hunting hat—which she hadn't been wearing, although she never went outside without it. Farnsworth crouched close to the bars and asked softly, "When did Louisiana give you the bread and biscuits, Mike?"

The retarded man's gaze danced away. "Wasn't no biscuits. They was some cookies, though."

Farnsworth rubbed his eyes. "Right, cookies. She brought them over yesterday?"

Mike shrugged uncomfortably. "I guess."

"Whaddya mean, you *guess,*" growled the sheriff of Dodge County.

"Sam, for pity's sake—"

Mike curled nearly into a ball. "I found it. I *found* it. This morning, the bag with stuff. Just laying there, so I picked it up and brought it in. I et some of the stuff, even. It was good. I didn't know. I didn't *know.* It was just laying there by the ravine, so I picked it up and brought the stuff in. I didn't hear Gook till later. Then I saw—I saw—"

"Then he saw the body and hightailed it halfway across the preserve before the chopper spotted him." Sam Jones put one cowboy-booted foot up on the paper-strewn sheriff's desk, although his demeanor was anything but relaxed. Honky, having survived being pried out of Mike's arms, lay draped over case folders like a shag carpet and snored obliviously, his gut crammed with baloney sandwiches from Sam's lunchbox. "Even if the sight of her made him fill his pants, why the hell run? Charley, he knows enough to call, or come to town and report it."

Farnsworth tried to down a sip of a coal-tar distillate the sheriff

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called coffee. "That's within the capacity of a competent person, Sam, guilty or innocent. All Cousin Mike understood was that there was big trouble. His survival to date has hinged on running away from trouble."

Mike hadn't even run competently. In a panicked straight line out through the open prairie. The helicopter spotted him less than twenty minutes after it had been called out to search.

Sam nudged the cat over enough to put his other foot on the desk. "Well, his running days are done. At least I ain't gonna find him froze to death in that shack some day."

Farnsworth studied his friend's hard, deep-set gaze. "Sam, you don't *really* think he killed her."

The gaze hardened further. "I don't gotta think nothing. The judge is gonna think it." He tapped off points on his fingers. "There's a history of harassment and complaints. There's threats with a firearm. There's valuables at stake, thanks to the testimony of our world-renowned expert." A finger shot at Farnsworth. "There's mental instability. There's access. There's bakery goods in the shack. And there's fingernail gouges all over her face, just like there was on my face awhile back. If you can't recall it, I sure as hell can. Couldn't shave for a week."

"Bloody hell." Farnsworth downed his coffee, and in a pique of self-torment poured himself another from the hot pot. "There's a lot of brush. She could've been scratched in the fall. Or the dog might have pawed her." He started to pace, caught it, parked himself in a chair. "She fed Mike all the time. I believe she baked as much for him as for herself. She could've been taking a bagful over to Mike and met someone else there."

"Who?"

"Who else has motive? How about those spray-painting neighbors? People with that sort of mentality wouldn't stop at tormenting elderly blacks. Retarded people would be fair game. Maybe she came over after Mike had already left to go hunting last evening, and—"

"Certain university people wanted her land real bad. Can we call that motive, too? And if you want to blame racists, you know what Mike calls this tomcat."

"Louisiana named the cat. I don't believe Mike had an inkling of what any of those vulgar animal names meant. Look, have you talked to that pet-store fellow, what's his name? Everybody's stealing everybody else's cats, but where *are* they?"

"Who the hell knows? If we're lucky, maybe they're all gone now."

A strange worm of a thought tapped Farnsworth deep among his other cogitations, vanishing before he could focus on it. It disrupted his attempts at rebuttal and brought his concern around to other things. He looked out the window at the fading afternoon light. Already the days were growing noticeably shorter. But what a day it'd been—Cousin Mike's cell door had slammed less than three hours after Farnsworth's arrival at the little farmstead. Perhaps the only good out

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of all this indeed was that Mike would never suffer another winter in that damned chicken coop.

Thinking of the shack brought the memory of flinging a piece of bread to Mike's ugly mother cat. "Sam, is anyone tending those farm animals?"

The sheriff had offered to call County Services or a neighbor to go out to Ma Loosiana's place and deal with livestock, but Farnsworth felt a need to go himself. The sun was setting as he finished chores he hadn't done since taking his turns at stable boy at the Oxford Polo Club. He didn't regret coming, although he dearly wished he'd taken a moment to change clothes and, especially, shoes. Nonetheless, as he leaned on a pitchfork and listened to the three equines hungrily grinding oats, a deep melancholy invaded his zoologist's heart. Fascination and love of animals had directed him to his profession; a concern for life had instituted his reputation as a stubborn and formidable crusader for wildlife preservation. Animals were his business; but as he studied the beasts of this one rickety stable, Farnsworth realized how abstract and impersonal that business could become. No good neighbor was going to take such wasted horseflesh. The County would put them down if Loosiana's heirs, had she any, didn't want them, or didn't put up money for their care. The dog would get an injection of phenobarbital at the animal shelter. The cats, too, if they could be caught. Unfed, they'd probably run off. The preserve could sustain a number of feral cats, which took the ecological niche of bountied-to-extinction bobcats. *No value to man therefore no right to exist.* Farnsworth cursed under his breath. He'd spent his life challenging that attitude.

He went out into the fresh, damp air of evening. A red sunset cast violet light over the world, giving the outbuildings, the trees across the road, and the prairie all around an ethereal hue. He slid the barn door closed except for a crack—no milk or bread remained in the cat pans and most of the bunch were gone hunting. The white mother cat had caught a mouse, and two kittens—the black ones—played with it outside in the long grass beside the barn. The white-and-ginger kitten was nowhere to be seen, but it had been around when he started chores that was the first thing he checked. *In the barn somewhere,* he assumed, but had to keep himself from going back to look for it. He went to the house.

Gook, the Sheltie dog, lay on the broken concrete step. A nearby pan of milk and bread was untouched. "Come now, starving the flesh wastes the spirit," Farnsworth encouraged, but he knew nothing would help. He went inside, sat at the fingerprint-dusted table, and, taking his own advice, helped himself to the platters of baked goods as evening dimmed the kitchen.

He had a maddening desire to go back out and check once more for the white-and-ginger kitten.

On hooks next to the kitchen door hung Ma Loosiana's barn coat, a dilapidated sweater, apron, and a blaze-orange hunting coverall

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Farnsworth studied it. Always wear the hat. Hunting season, I put on the whole dang suit. Hunting. The barn cats were a-hunting. Then his jaws stopped in mid-grind of a cinnamon roll. His gaze fastened to the coverall. *Where's the hat?*

An inner demon of disquiet prodded him out of the chair. Taking what was left of a gallon of milk from the refrigerator, he left the house, locking the door with a skeleton key found in a kitchen cabinet.

The white mother cat still tended now-invisible kittens by the horse barn. Her coat glowed in the deepening shadows of dusk. *Angel cat.*

Farnsworth hurried now; he hadn't brought a torch and didn't want to suffer the ignominy of getting lost in the dark in a woods fifty yards from his own vehicle. Mike's ugly mother cat was probably out hunting, too. He distinctly remembered leaving the henhouse door open.

Already, night cloaked the woods and it was only a little brighter in the clearing around the shack, a dark silhouette in the gloaming.

A tiny ball of white hopped around the trampled grass near the shack. If the mother was with it, she was too dark to see; but the little one reflected every photon of remaining dusk. Farnsworth paused at the edge of the clearing and stared at it.

Honky was a little light when he first come to me—

Farnsworth thought he felt the slightest of caresses on his cheek.

And then he watched drop-jawed as the little ball of light lifted gracefully off the ground, soundlessly rose over the roof of the shack, floated over the treetops, and vanished into the deep twilight sky.

"Sam—Sam, I know what happened to the kittens! And that's not all!" Farnsworth barely caught his breath; to get to her phone he'd almost taken down Ma Loosiana's door; struggling with the infernal skeleton key, his excitement agitating the yard dog and nearly costing him a leg.

"Charley, hold on one second. I said *hold on!"* In That Tone. "You still at Loosiana's place?"

"Yes. But listen, I—"

"*You* listen. You get the hell away from there right now! Anybody sees you out there, it's gonna look damn bad for you."

"Sam, I believe I know what happened to—" Farnsworth caught up short. "What do you mean, look bad for me?"

The sheriff's tone softened an iota. "Rubinstevitch came trottin' over here just after you left, soon's he heard about Loosiana and that I throwed Cousin Mike in the lockup. Ruby lawyers for a whole bunch 'a farmers around here. Charley, she made a will just after you had that first talk with her. She gave the whole damn ranch to you—house, horses, cats, and that ain't the half of it. To hell with the damned animals, I'll come feed 'em myself if it'll keep you outta there. *You* hightail it into town right friggin' *now!"*

For a stunned moment Farnsworth couldn't inhale. Finally he managed to finish his interrupted message. "Sam, I think I know what happened to Louisiana."

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The sheriff of Dodge County dumped an armload of hay in a manger and wiped sweat off his wide forehead. He studied the bay horse a moment. "She had an eye for horseflesh when she bought them two nags."

"I would wager she watched them run, back in their racing days." Farnsworth thought of the clippings decorating the farmhouse wall. Had he looked closer yesterday, he might have recognized two familiar equine faces in the collection of winner's circle photos. The mare won or placed in eighteen of twenty-eight before she went to the brood farm, where she failed to produce a single winner. Dum-Dum had shown in fifty-two of fifty-eight when he was put to stud. His get was average. He ended up a teaser, then a work horse at the track. Never gelded, a tribute to his sweet disposition.

Farmers' lawyer Rubinstevitch had not found human heirs to Ma Loosiana's—Miss Elvira May Edwards—worldly goods, but he did find four trotters who'd proven themselves in high-stakes heats all over the country, and had been sold for even higher stakes, the last one for eighty thousand dollars. All of them recent products of the old mare and the even older stallion.

Sam ran a hand over the bay's washboard ribs. "Ol' fella's gotta be damn near thirty." He slowly shook his head. "By God, she had an eye."

The evening was a duplicate of yesterday's. Farnsworth, seated on a bale, had had to talk fast not to be forced to squirm in the cop car while Sam did the chores, which he did with more alacrity than Farnsworth had. "I'm practiced at it," the sheriff explained. "Took care of my granpa's stock on the reservation a helluva lotta years."

Farnsworth was piqued. "Reservation?"

"I got his name. I'm quarter Chippewa. How many Joneses you know in a state fulla Polacks, Krauts, and bohunks?"

Not many, Farnsworth admitted.

The sheriff closed gates, turned off the bare-bulb light, and slid the door shut. Farnsworth joined him as they headed for the waiting sheriff's vehicle.

Sam said, "There's still two kittens. The black ones."

"They'll grow up to be monsters just like their sire." He retrieved a head-sized, dark green pumpkin from the car, and a plastic bag containing a wad of blaze-orange fur. "Here." He handed the pumpkin to the sheriff. "Thanks for getting that on short notice."

"Ol' man Wallashek couldn't figger why I wanted a punkin now. Won't none be ripe for another month." The dark gaze shifted warily to Farnsworth. "This better work, Charley."

"Yes. Quite," Farnsworth said softly.

They crossed the road into the woods. The sun was still above the horizon, but sinking. Farnsworth took Mike's axe from the shack, noting that the ugly cat had stayed around. With relish she accepted his offering of table scraps, apparently not overly mourning the loss of all her children. "Come on," he motioned to his companion. "We'll set it up

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by the ravine. That's where Mike found the bag of bakery."

A few yards from the limestone precipice, Farnsworth cut the top off a little sapling about chest-height. He then jammed the green pumpkin down on the stake, and took the fur from the plastic bag. An odor of spray paint wafted from the fur. He raised an eyebrow to the sheriff. "Got the idea from your vandals."

"Why not just leave it white, Charley?"

Farnsworth fluffed up the fur. The only expendable piece he could find in the Zoology Museum was off a road-killed opossum. "We're testing the color as well as the substrate." He checked the little radio transmitter wired to the fur, noted its signal on a hand-held receiver, then draped the fur over the top of the pumpkin like a shaggy hat.

They retreated to a thick stand of bladdernuts and waited.

The sun set. Purple haze formed through the woods. Twilight descended, giving that translucent, substanceless aura to old trees and saplings alike. The pumpkin on a stick nearly imitated a short human standing there. The blaze-orange fur lost its brilliant hue, yet began to radiate a colorless glow. Within minutes the pumpkin melded invisibly in the shadows. Then the woods grew dark, and the glow of the sky dimmed, and dimmed. The fur also faded.

But not enough so that both Farnsworth and Sam Jones could not follow it as it rose off the pumpkin, which thumped to the ground. The fur sailed without sound over the ravine and into the trees beyond, vanishing into the new night.

"By God, Charley, I never—" The sheriff gaped with astonishment.

"Let's go!" Farnsworth held up the receiver as both men clicked on flashlights and charged down the ravine, up the other side, and into the woods in the direction of the flying fur piece.

Less than forty yards later, the receiver's electronic finger pointed up into a huge old shagbark hickory. High atop the rail-straight bole covered with peeling bark was a mass of twigs—a tightly packed nest, from which two fiercely glowing coals looked down into the beams of the flashlights.

A long *hoooo* called from above, followed by an agitated *click-click-click.*

"That's its beak. A threat display," Farnsworth explained. *"Bubo virginianus.* Next we'll get a full wing ruffle. Good thing it's the wrong time of year to have young in the nest. Great horned owls are viciously protective."

A little flurry tumbled down from the darkness and was caught in a flashlight beam before it hit the ground: the blaze-orange opossum fur.

"It appears my ruse has been discovered and rejected," Farnsworth said.

"Yeah," Sam Jones agreed, with a rare softness to his voice. "There's another." In a circle of his searching light lay Ma Loosiana's torn hunting hat.

"Great horned owls prey on anything from shrews to muskrats. The

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strike kills the target at once. Now, owls hunt largely by sound," Farnsworth was explaining. Testimony in the judge's chamber suited him as comfortably as lecturing to five hundred students. He failed to warn judge, sheriff, county welfare people, lawyers, and other eye-glazed parties that he usually took an hour just to warm to a subject. "The shape of their heads and the pattern of facial feathers channel the slightest of sounds. Flight feathers are softened so that they fly virtually soundlessly. Their attack dive could course directly over your shoulder and you'd never hear it. Nor see it—the color and pattern of owl feathers render the bird quite invisible in dim light. But that's not saying owls don't have excellent night vision, which they do. And one thing that certainly catches any predator's eye is prey with no cryptic coloring. No browns or blacks or stripes or spots to help it blend with its background. There's a reason, ladies and gentlemen, why albino mammals are rare.

"Our owls—" further study had determined that the huge nest was home to a well-established breeding pair— "learned to take white kittens who played outside at twilight, when owls hunt most actively, thus imprinting on light color, including the largely white coat of Louisiana's calico kittens.

"Blaze orange is perceived as a bright color to our eyes not only because of its actual hue, but also because of the paint's special light-reflective qualities. At night, it can reflect dim light and appear to glow, just as a pure white surface does when surrounded with dark, light-absorbing materials. The owls keyed in on the unnatural brightness of the cats, and automatically went for what was, to them, the same prey on top of Missus Louisiana." Striking talons had gouged the pumpkin with the exact kind and placement of rends left on the old woman's forehead.

"I would offer the following scenario: Louisiana, still taking care of Mike despite their falling-out over cats, had decided to bring him that bag of baked goods, when—whether he was off hunting already or merely out of sight—she witnessed a "flying kitten," just as I did the very next night, at probably the same time. Amazed and curious, she hustled off in the direction the kitten had been taken. Having no torch, and with the night swiftly falling, she stopped at the ravine. I daresay she stood there a few moments, watching and wondering. And then she, or rather her hat, glowing with unnatural color at eventide, had its altercation with the first owl's mate. Staggered, she dropped the bag where Mike was to find it the next morning. One misstep plunged her into the ravine."

The old bay trotter shuffled around his stall and came to Farnsworth's hand to take an offered carrot. The sound of carrot meat snapping and grinding indicated at least some teeth left in that venerable head. Farnsworth noted the horse's sunken, hazy eyes and even bonier hips and ribs. He was surprised the animal had lasted the winter. But then, there was that fulfilled expression to the old rake's gaze. By this time

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next year, the mare in the opposite box stall would have dropped, according to documented track records, her fifteenth foal, which had already garnered twenty thousand dollars' worth of investment options. Loosiana did not live in semi-poverty by necessity. She could have sipped Perrier, afforded a jacuzzi in every room, and sweltered in steam-heated solariums, but she pumped well water at the sink, took bubblebaths and cooked her old bones in front of wood fires all winter. She seemed to live to make a point, although what it was, Farnsworth wasn't sure he understood.

Cousin Mike helped admire the trotter. He caressed Honky's long, fine pelt before putting the cat down on a straw bale. Most of the cats were out sunning in new spring grass. The two grown-up black kittens lounged fat and glossy by the food pans, which Gook was licking clean.

"Have you named those two yet?" Farnsworth asked.

"Yes, sir. One's Blacky and the other's Shadow. They sure look like Nigger, don't they?"

"Those are good names. Why don't you give the other animals new names, too?"

Mike blinked. "Why?"

Farnsworth sighed. "Mike, those names aren't, well—" How to say it? "Take Dum-Dum here. His real name is Commander of Warlord's Sutter Farms Prince."

"That's too big a name. Loosiana named him Dum-Dum after me. See, that's what I'm called. When I go to the mill, people call me that. I didn't used to like it. But Loosiana showed me it don't make no difference. He's a Dum-Dum, and he's a great horse. Nigger, he's a great cat. And Jewbitch, she's just as nice and pretty as Honky. Honky-Dory," he said, stroking the tomcat into a roaring purr. He looked askance at Farnsworth, then tapped his heart. "You are what you are. Not what people call you. Loosiana showed me."

Farnsworth had insisted that veterinary students come out and desex all the barn cats, including Honky. There was no need to feed owls, or complicate Mike's life further with shifty cat fanciers at the door. Any new pets would come from the animal shelter. Or in a sack tossed in a nearby ditch—one of countless daily acts of cruelty, balanced, perhaps, on occasion, by kindness, no matter how rough and guileless.

Mike had all he could do and then some as caretaker of Loosiana's farm, now Dodge County Preserve Research Station Ten. To keep Mike in the farmhouse, Farnsworth had the shack hauled out of the woods, parked with the farm outbuildings, and filled with Poultry Research's unwanted chicks. Biology grads doing studies on the preserve were given semester stipends to occupy the farmhouse's six extra bedrooms, and make sure the place was maintained.

Some of the students invariably tried to teach Cousin Mike to read and write, a losing effort, and Mike invariably taught them about animals, those teachings never learned in formal wildlife studies. He was always successful. ●

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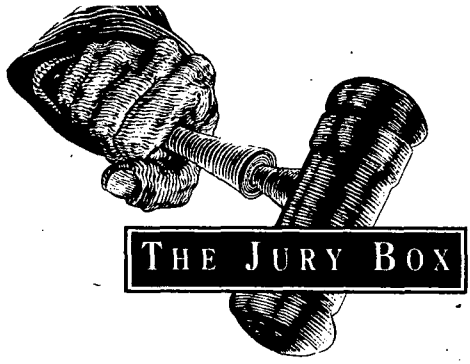

by Jon L. Breen

The Science Fiction Writers of America give their annual Nebula Awards to authors of fiction in four lengths: short story (under 7,500 words), novelette (7,500-17,499), novella (17,500 to 39,999), and novel (40,000 or more). It is understandable that the Mystery Writers of America's Edgars, in common with the other annual mystery awards, honor novels and short stories only, the intermediate lengths being so rare in the genre. But when an exceptional piece of work appears at an "awkward" length, it runs the danger of being overlooked. Peter Straub's extraordinary short novel "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff" occupies just under a hundred pages in Otto Penzler's original anthology *Murder for Vengeance* (Delacorte, $21.95); with large type and more blank space, it could easily have been published as a separate book. If it must be pigeonholed in a sub-category, call it a hitman story, but one of the most harrowing and offbeat I've ever read, marked by its author's usual masterful style. Though a perennial bestseller, Straub might be even more popular if he were not so subtle and original. Since this is obviously no short story, I hope the Edgar *novel* committee will consider it.

Among the other major names in Penzler's anthology are Mary Higgins Clark, Thomas H. Cook, and Joyce Carol Oates. Bookending Straub's finale is Lawrence Block's lead-off tale "Like a Bone in the Throat," an equally unusual and thought-provoking work to which the short-story committee should give a long look. (Be warned these tales are strong stuff: based on the work of Block and Straub, the title could have been *Torture for Revenge.)*

A disproportionate percentage of the best crime and mystery fiction being written today concerns British police detectives, and a surprising number of those sleuths have pervasive musical interests. The choral and classical music tastes of Colin Dexter's Morse are well-known, and below are the latest from two other music-loving coppers: John Harvey's jazz-drenched Charlie Resnick and Peter Robinson's

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opera-obsessed Alan Banks. (Is it a coincidence that both their creators are also published poets?)

**** John Harvey: *Still Waters,* Holt, $23. Nottingham's Detective Inspector Resnick wonders if a young teacher, the subject of abuse by her dentist husband, is the victim of a random serial killer or someone closer to home. Though Harvey deliberately gives his police procedurals some of the untidiness of real life, the central case is resolved quite satisfactorily, and the pace, prose, and characterization are superb. (Several of Resnick's earlier cases, including his great 1989 debut *Lonely Hearts* are newly available in trade paperback editions [Owl, $11].)

*** Peter Robinson: *Blood at the Root,* Avon, $22. Chief Inspector Banks and his Yorkshire colleagues look into the murder of a white supremacist, and suspicion falls on local Pakistani youths. Robinson, as always, delivers strongly in all areas, but this time the detectives' private lives, including the precarious state of Banks's marriage, generate more interest than the mystery plot. The novel ends with several unresolved personal issues that will make series fans impatient for the next volume.

*** Carole Buggé: *The Star of India,* St. Martin's, $21.95. In this latest Sherlock Holmes pastiche, the MacGuffin is the titular diamond and Moriarty, like Holmes, survived Reichenbach Falls. The humor, the clever plotting, and the infectious love for the canon, along with a refreshing absence of gimmicks, permit this entertaining first novel to be highly recommended to readers like me who can never get enough ersatz Baker Street. There are some gaffes, however—Holmes, Watson, and brother Mycroft would never refer to the whole of London as "the city of London," a designation used only to refer to the financial district, and I doubt Holmes would be guilty of such modern locutions as "I feel" for "I think" and the horrendous construction "just because . . . is no reason." (Moriarty is actually Holmes's client in "The Revenge of the Fenian Brotherhood," Buggé's enjoyable contribution to Marvin Kaye's latest anthology of pastiches, *The Confidential Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* [St. Martin's, $23.95], which also includes Edward D. Hoch's evocative "The Adventure of the Dying Ship," at least the second story to put Holmes on the Titanic and have him cross paths with the great detective story writer Jacques Futrelle.)

In issue #59 of *Mystery Scene,* a periodical every serious crime fiction buff should be reading, Stephen Marlowe recalls that some time in the early sixties a multi-collaborator crime novel (with chapters from such eminent bylines as Bart Spicer, John D. MacDonald, Hillary Waugh, Helen McCloy, and Veronica Parker Johns) was planned as the annual MWA anthology, but when nobody was willing or able to tie up the diverse strands in a final chapter, the project was aborted. A more recent such experiment, the newly reprinted *Naked Came the Manatee* (Fawcett Columbine,

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$11.95), was first serialized in the *Miami Herald Tropic* in 1995 and published in hardcover by Putnam. The complicated tale concerns a manatee known as Booger, who sometimes is wise beyond his brain size; a 102-year-old environmentalist; a severed head that may belong to Fidel Castro; and three Floridian series characters introduced by their creators and left to be maneuvered by other contributors: Les Standiford's John Deal, Paul Levine's Jake Lassiter, and Edna Buchanan's Britt Montero. The quality of the writing, with the tone set by humorist Dave Barry's opening chapter, and the remarkable cohesiveness of the plot, thanks to the willingness and ability of the brilliant novelist Carl Hiassen to finish things off, make the joint effort well worth reading. Also among the thirteen contributors are James W. Hall and Elmore Leonard. (It would be fun to know what guidelines the contributors had and how the joint novel was assembled, but this goes unexplained.)

Rosemary Herbert has edited *Murder on Deck!: Shipboard and Shoreline Mystery Stories* (Oxford University Press, $25), one of the better historical anthologies of recent date. Contributors range from the very famous to the lesser known, from old-timers to contemporaries, and most of the entries are not overly familiar. The most unusual inclusion is Gabriel García Márquez's "The Last Voyage of the Ghost Ship," four closely packed pages and all one sentence! (Did even fellow Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner, also represented here, ever write a sentence that long?) As an added inducement, Herbert's editorial notes are as informative and enthusiastic as early Ellery Queen.

"Well, I just hope the bank appreciates all the extra work you take home every night."

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COURT OUT

by Phil Lovesey

When I was first made redundant, I was quite happy with the situation. I'd been bored with office life for years, spending most of my days fantasising an end to the commuting, internal politics, and pointless pen-pushing. I found the whole business of this kind of work a complete waste of the only life I had to live. So when, on that glorious Friday morning in September two years ago, I walked away with six months' money and an undeservedly glowing reference, I did so with a broad grin on my face.

In truth, I'd already planned for the moment, daydreaming of starting my own sideline when the opportunity arose. But in the meantime, I cherished my freedom, safe in the knowledge that my redundancy and Ellen's wages would keep the family secure for a while.

So I set about my new life with gusto, catching up on the latest novels and videos, reaping the benefits that a UB40, an unemployment-benefit card, supplies at the local cinema.

Friends of ours didn't always share my enthusiasm, using guilt to disguise their own jealousies. I remember Dick and Judy being most insistent that mine was a purely selfish attitude, placing far too much stress on Ellen to be the provider. Actually, this was Judy's opinion, voiced through her long-suffering husband on the rare occasions he was sent out on instructions to try to talk some sense into me. Ellen and I always laughed, blissfully content with both our lots, neither expectant nor dependant on the other. Indeed, from the moment I was declared unfit for the rat race, our twenty-year marriage strengthened considerably, cemented by standing back and watching the cracks and fissures widen in other marriages still toeing the expected society line.

A former freelance copywriter who now writes fiction fulltime, Phil Lovesey lives in Chelmsford, England with his wife and three children. The author's first work of fiction was published in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in 1994. Since then, he has written nearly a dozen more stories for *EQMM* and a mystery novel entitled *Death Duties,* which will be released by HarperCollins UK in 1998. ✝

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As autumn turned to winter, I spent less time strolling in the town's parks, turning instead to centrally heated forms of amusement. One day, while fulfilling my duties at the local job centre, I was berating the lack of cheap entertainment to another of the town's unemployed.

"Try the Crown Court, mate," he told me. "They open at half-nine, six cases to choose from, judge sits down at ten, and bingo, s'like half a dozen soap operas happenin' right before your eyes. What's more, it's free."

Within three weeks I was a regular in the public galleries, receiving knowing smiles from security staff each morning, then settling down to voyeuristically observe the wheels of justice struggle to stem the rising tide of the town's criminal misdemeanours. And it was a magnificent winter of local crime, the courthouse welcoming a succession of offenders to be eagerly scrutinised by twelve good men and women, and those of us installed at ringside, too.

Rapes, burglaries, muggings, violent assault, affray, the courts played host to them all, providing vivid tableaus of heartbreak, jealousy, and deceit, making any petty worries or concerns I may have had pale by comparison. To say that I found my time there cathartic would be over-egging, but I would never deny its therapeutic value. I had stepped outside the system, you see, and the ritualistic dramas which unfolded before me were all too often the tragic consequences of criminal actions perpetrated by others still caught within it. In short, my time in court confirmed how fortunate I was to be idling my time away watching proceedings in the first place. Every night, as I walked away, I counted my blessings that I was free to return in the morning.

Then, one startling week in November, I got a murder. A real case involving the state's accusation of the death of one human being by another—the celebrated "Tiddlywink Murder." Competition for seats in the gallery was intense, and the whole court building was overrun with journalists filing stories over mobile phones, anxious to supply the most blood-curdling copy. And, in truth, they had a wealth of grisly fact and intriguing supposition to choose from.

A handsome young man named Gordon Cain stood accused of the willful murder of his common-law wife, Rachel Jacobs. The prosecution's case looked watertight, insinuating that Cain returned home from his part-time job as a play-group leader after finishing for the day around lunchtime and faked a robbery and break-in, killing Miss Jacobs with a single blow to the heart from a ten-inch kitchen knife, now bloodied, bagged, and labelled "Exhibit 2" for us all to see.

I'll admit that the first sight of it, held aloft deliberately by the wigged prosecuting counsel as he outlined the Crown's case, sent a brief chill through my body. But stranger still was "Exhibit 1," a tiny red plastic counter virtually hidden in the transparent bag—the famed tiddlywink found lying two feet from the body. The prosecution placed much store in the tiny counter, contending that it provided the link between Cain's home and his workplace. Police had uncovered a tiddly-

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winks set at the play-group and suspected the rogue counter had somehow stuck to his clothing or fallen into a pocket during the morning, only to be left unknowingly at the scene of the crime following the violent struggle which preceded the murderous act.

Other factors also pointed to Cain's guilt: frequent rows overheard by neighbours, Cain's own reputation as something of a local Romeo, and a previous charge of assault brought by the dead woman herself. The Crown's succession of character witnesses did an effective job in colouring Cain as the sort of womanising lowlife who was easily capable of faking a bungled burglary to cover a brutal act of cold-blooded murder. The more I eavesdropped on my fellow spectators' opinions during recesses, the more I realised that if their views tallied with the jury's, Cain was going down for a long time.

Yet the longer I watched the proceedings unravel, the more I felt drawn to the handsome chap in the dock. He had about him the air of impending tragedy, like some magnificent deer frozen in the sights of a dozen hunters' guns. For the most part he simply stared straight ahead, eyes fixed on the royal crest emblazoned above the judge. Very occasionally, as yet another former friend testified to his volatile temperament, he would lower his eyes and slowly shake his head in abject disappointment.

The defence counsel tried her level best to muddy the waters of the prosecution's case, consulting police records to undermine witness credibility, but after three days, when the Crown prosecutor finally sat down, even I was forced to admit that Cain was most likely the perpetrator.

On day four, I arrived half an hour earlier to be sure of a seat. The defence was set to outline its case, and it seemed the whole world was eager to find out how on earth she would wriggle her client away from such a certain guilty verdict.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," she began, fixing their steely faces with a warm smile. "Much has been made by my learned friend of my client's supposed bad character. Indeed, were I sitting where you are now, and on the merely circumstantial evidence and supposition he has presented to this court, I myself would have grave misgivings about Gordon Cain's innocence."

A nice opening, I thought, siding with the prosecution before tearing the case to shreds.

"When my client was arrested for this crime," she continued, "he told police that he never returned home on the afternoon in question. Furthermore, he stated that he spent the rest of the day with a woman."

An excited murmur rippled round the court, and she paused, letting it run its course. Reporters to my right and left sat with pens poised, anticipating the divulgence of fresh new evidence.

"When pressed to identify the woman in order to substantiate his alibi, my client professed reluctance, preferring instead to preserve the

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reputation of his lover, a woman of some prominence in the local community."

One or two around me let out scornful sniggers, unimpressed by the thought of Cain's supposed noble actions, and were swiftly silenced by a frosty glare from the presiding judge. For my part, I sat mesmerised by the admission, switching glances between Cain and his counsel, his shame-ridden face and her beaming smile. From her expression it seemed inevitable that Cain's lover was about to make her court debut, an opinion also shared by the prosecution, who whispered feverishly across the benches, consulting from vast volumes of law.

The defence pressed on. "However, ladies and gentlemen, such is the magnitude and importance of the charges facing my client, that the lady in question has agreed to come before this court and testify on his behalf. The defence calls . . ."

The prosecuting barrister was instantly up on his feet. "Objection, Your Honour. This is a new witness, leaving the Crown little time to prepare for any cross-examination."

The defence countered, smiling appealingly at the man in charge. "Your honour, the woman in question only gave notice to testify late last night. In doing so, she brings considerable shame on herself and her family, yet she feels she cannot hide away while an injustice is done to my client. I beg Your Honour's indulgence in this matter."

The judge paused to calmly consider both sides of the argument. If he had any inkling all eyes in the room were firmly fixed on him he gave no indication of it, rubbing his chin and pursing his lips as he judged the matter without prejudice. "I think," he said in low, measured tones, "that in this particular case, the defendant is entitled to this witness's testimony in order that any question of the validity of his alibi be cleared up once and for all." He smiled at Cain's barrister. "You may call your witness."

The prosecution made a show of looking suitably aggrieved as they sat, returning to a zealous huddle as the rest of the court waited in expectant silence for the first sighting of Cain's mistress. "The defence calls Mrs. Judy Graham."

My heart missed a beat. Surely I'd been mistaken? I shot a glance at the reporter's pad to my left, seeing nothing but unintelligible shorthand. Judy Graham? Surely not *the* Judy Graham, "our" Judy Graham, Judy Graham of Dick and Judy fame? I strained my ears as the usher called again from the courtroom doors.

"Mrs. Judy Graham."

I strained for a better view. It had to be a coincidence, another Judy Graham, something we'd all laugh about the next time we met. It simply couldn't be her. Not with Cain. Not with anyone but Dick.

Then, as excitement dried my throat, in she walked, the familiar tall figure dressed in the same salmon pink two-piece I'd last seen at a friend's wedding in June. Judy, "our" Judy. I was simply too stunned to talk, which in retrospect was a good thing, for I was also consumed

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with the urge to turn to the reporter on my left and reveal my long-standing relationship with the woman who now commanded all eyes of the court.

It was as if I'd just seen her competing on a television game show. "You see her," I was desperate to say. "Family friend, for years. We're this close, honestly. She cooked us supper only last week. Beautiful house, big garden, lovely husband, a wonderful couple. Their teenage lad, Edward, is a bit of a handful, wants to join a rock band instead of going to university. But overall, lovely family. Go on, just ask me anything, Judy Graham and I go back years."

And as she entered the witness box and took the Good Book in her right hand and read aloud the words printed on the card, I was desperate for Ellen to be with me, sharing my amazement and incredulity. Above all else, one question raced round and round my shocked mind. What the hell was Judy doing with a young lad like Gordon Cain?

The defence began. "Are you Mrs. Judy Graham?"

"I am."

"Speak up, if you wouldn't mind," the judge gently coaxed.

"You come here of your own free will?"

"I do."

"Mrs. Graham, would you mind telling this court what happened on Tuesday the eighteenth of March?"

I saw Judy swallow hard before her gaze drifted towards the slumped figure in the dock. "I met Gordon at the play-group at twelve."

"Gordon Cain? Would you mind pointing him out for the benefit of the jury?"

I watched transfixed as her shaking finger pointed to Cain. This was completely beyond my reasoning. Judy Graham had a toy-boy lover? The very notion seemed completely absurd, yet here she stood, under oath, before a packed court of reporters, admitting her infidelity.

"Then what happened, Mrs. Graham?"

"He locked up the toys, then the hall, and we left. Together. In my car."

"And where did you both go?"

Her voice cracked slightly. "To our usual hotel."

"Usual?"

She lowered her head. "We'd been having an affair for eight months. We spent afternoons together in a hotel outside town." She looked the jury straight in the eyes. "He never went home until I dropped him there at six that night. He was with me. He never killed her."

Reporters in the gallery were already slipping outside to phone their editors with news of the development. Others quickly took their places, frantically scribbling to record every detail. I sat numbed by the confession, initial excitement giving way to sadness. Most of all, I thought of Dick, and the effect the revelations would have on my hard-working old friend. I also felt a little sickened at Judy's deception, feeling I too had been deceived in some way, that in carefully cultivating the image of

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domestic harmony to Ellen and me, she'd really played a game of rank hypocrisy with her closest friends.

"And why, Mrs. Graham," the defence continued, "have you remained silent until now?"

I thought for one moment she was about to cry, then she recovered her composure, took a deep breath, and replied, "I simply never thought that it would come to this. The whole charge just seemed so ludicrous, I felt sure it would be dropped. Then as the months passed and the case grew nearer, I began to realise that I was the only one who could say what really happened. Gordon's simply too much of a gentleman to name me as his alibi. I knew I'd have to do this in order to save him from going to prison for doing nothing but bringing me happiness."

"At considerable risk to your own position?" the defence encouraged.

Judy sighed heavily and nodded. "My marriage is almost certainly over, together with chairwoman of the play-group, Townswomen's Guild, that kind of thing."

"And friends!" I felt like shouting, watching with distaste as the notebooks filled with her noble sentiments.

By the end of the afternoon, the prosecution's case lay in tatters. Appearances by hotel staff with recorded entries of Judy and Graham's frequent stays, including the afternoon in question, fully supported the alibi, leaving the police with nothing better to do but instruct the prosecution to halt the case in order to save a few taxpayers' pounds. Gordon Cain walked free to be photographed by a pack of baying journalists arm in arm with Judy on the courtroom steps.

And as for the "Tiddlywink Murder," it was never solved, officially. Ellen and I offered what support we could to Dick throughout the inevitable divorce, both of us glad he kept the house after Judy moved in with the young man she saved from oblivion. And in truth, I'm forced to admit that Dick began to change for the better, showing a different, slightly more adventurous side, occasionally taking the odd day off from work to accompany me on my travels, chewing the cud over a few pints at lunchtime, snoozing in the back of the Odeon during the afternoon.

Edward, too, seemed little disturbed by his mother's unexpected admission and subsequent departure. He chose the band over university and spent his evenings belting out hard rock at deafening decibels to anyone foolhardy enough to pay money to come and listen. "Satan's Wrath," they rather poetically called themselves, and one night when I felt particularly adventurous, or stupid, or both, I left Ellen alone with the television remote and a box of Milk Tray, and attended one of his "gigs."

After nearly an hour spent claustrophobically crushed between hordes of leather-bound, sweaty teenagers leaping incoherently to what apparently passed as music, the band finally finished and I caught up with Edward basking in the adoring euphoria offered by two young female fans. He seemed genuinely surprised to see me, although my older presence soon shooed away his eager groupies.

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"Trust an old man to cramp your style," I grinned, shaking a hand warmed by the past hour's playing.

"You saw us?" he replied. "I'm impressed."

"Wish I could say the same."

This time he grinned. "Well, it isn't everybody's cup of tea, but we like it."

"Going well, is it?" I asked casually.

"Single column in the *NME* last week, cult following this week," he boasted. "Recording deal imminent within the next six months, they say."

"Now I'm impressed," I replied.

He began packing away his gear, joining other band members coiling cables and collapsing microphone stands. "Of course," he said, "it all kicked off for me when Mum left."

"How so?"

"You must remember," he said. "All the fuss about me going to university? Mum's little plan to turn me into Mr. Bloody Normal? Degree, wife, two kids, and a home in the suburbs, the works. Well, the moment I found out about her and Gordon Cain I thought, bollocks to all that."

"You knew?" I said. "Before the trial?"

He smiled, keen to sound tougher than his years. "I was always bunking off school, wasn't I? One day I come home early, let myself in, and there's strange noises coming from upstairs. I went out again. Couldn't cope with it, I s'pose. Then Cain comes out half an hour later. Gutted, I was. Sickened by her bloody double standards." He stabbed his chest angrily. "I was the one who had to be the good little boy, conforming, while she was at it with some stranger behind my dad's back."

"You told your father?"

" 'Course. Not that he'd do anything about it. Even told him I'd followed Cain home, knew where he lived if he fancied facing him out. Dad bottled it, of course. Mum wore the trousers in that house. What she said goes, and that was that." He leaned closer to me, lowering his voice. "The day Mum testified for that creep was the day I grew bloody wings. The marriage was as good as dead, she buggered off, and I was free to join the band. The rat race had lost another prisoner."

I considered his point, ears still ringing from the terrible battering inflicted by his inept guitar playing. "You gained a lot, didn't you, from Rachel Jacobs's murder?"

"I'll tell you this much," he said, reaching for his guitar. "Whoever did for her, did me and me dad one huge bloody favour." He crouched down and placed the lethal instrument of sonic destruction safely inside a black felt-lined case. As he did so, a tiny piece of red plastic fell from the top pocket of his faded denim jacket. His hand raced towards it, but mine was quicker, slapping the stage as I covered the disc.

"It's a tiddlywink, isn't it?" I asked, heart pounding.

Edward's eyes met mine. "It's a plectrum," he said nervously, knowing in that instant that I knew everything, the lengths he'd gone to, the

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sacrifice he'd made for his own shot at freedom. I picked up the red tiddlywink and placed it back in his pocket.

He looked away. "They play better than normal plectrums," was all he could offer.

I shook my head and turned to leave. "Perhaps," I said, "you'll dedicate your first record to the memory of Rachel Jacobs? I think that would be nice, don't you?"

"It's still there," he whispered. "Every night I think I'm going to wake up screaming."

I said nothing, walking from the empty fetid room out into a chill winter's night. And as I made my way home, I thanked every star in heaven that the only price I paid for my freedom was my redundancy.●

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader:

Would you believe it? We're fifty-seven years old and still growing! If you're a regular reader or a collector of *EQMM,* you probably noticed right off the bat the inch we've added to our height. And if, like many of our devoted subscribers; you have a copy of every issue published since our debut in 1941, you'll know that like the good genie in the bottle, we've experienced several previous transformations of size. With an eye toward the new millennium, our guiding spirit is thinking tall—like the towering basketball players we see on TV, like the ever-bigger boxes of cereal on the supermarket shelf, like the sea of other magazines on the newsstand racks. Not too tall, just lofty enough to poke our head above the crowd and make it easier for you to spot us at your local magazine outlet.

As Ellery Queen said in his very first letter to readers: "(*EQMM*) is compact and in the convenient pocket size. It is deliberately designed so that he may read who runs as well as he who likes to curl up in bed; and it has the important further consideration of visual attractiveness, so that you will want to preserve your copies of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in the library of your home as you preserve your books." Our new, larger format holds firm to that ideal: we're still small enough to fit in a handbag or coat pocket, and we've been made even more attractive by the addition of sturdier paper and more space on our pages for cartoons, art, and verse. Moreover, the larger page allows us to fit just as much fiction in the new 144 page book as was previously contained in 160 pages! As readers and collectors, you'll find lots of good things in our new, still-compact package. Read it and enjoy!

Your editor,

Janet Hutchings

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THE TARNISHED STAR

by Jon L. Breen

The marshal stood in the dusty street, looked around at the timid townspeople who had finally, after the shooting was safely over, surged out of the buildings. He could have said something to them. He could have said plenty. But that wasn't his way. Instead, he removed the star from his chest, dropped it into the dirt, and climbed onto the buckboard that would carry him and his new wife out of Hadleyville for the second time that day. Tex Ritter's voice was heard reprising the plaintive song: "Do not forsake me, oh my darling . . ."

Jon Breen's byline appears in every issue of *EQMM*, but only rarely, these days, on a piece of fiction. You know the California writer as *EQMM*'s incisive, long-time book reviewer; perhaps you didn't know that he is also a fiction writer of international reputation, having earned the British Crime Writer's Association's gold dagger for best novel in 1988. ✝

The lights came up in Plantain Point's state-of-the-art movie theater. Most of us weren't of the generation or in the industry that applauds movies, but I could tell from the murmurs that *High Noon* hadn't lost any of its power in the forty-four years since it was first released.

My name is Sebastian Grady, a relatively content resident of one of the best retirement communities around. I'd come to the screening with Charlie Fordyce, a retired lawyer who loves nothing better than to rile me up. My usual date for these screenings, Melanie August, can't abide Westerns, even great ones. As we pried our old bodies out of our seats, I thought Charlie looked troubled.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Oh, nothing, I guess, Seb. I suppose it's just our age. The memory goes."

"Speak for yourself," I said as we made our way (I won't say tottered) up the aisle. "My memory's not going anyplace, and I turned ninety-six—"

"On New Year's Day, yeah, I know." When we got out to the lobby of the facility—the gift of a hot young writer-producer-director hyphenate whose grandfather was one of the residents—Charlie didn't join the senior-citizen rush to the refreshment tables, so I knew something

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must really be bothering him. We sat down in a couple of chairs considerately provided in the lobby for short-range walkers and Charlie continued, "You're ninety-six, but I'm barely eighty, and *my* memory . . . Seb, there weren't different versions of this movie, were there?"

"There was a science-fiction flick with Sean Connery that was mighty similar. *Outland,* I think it was called."

"No, no, I mean another version with Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly."

"It depends on what you mean by another version. There are always different working versions of a movie, ones they show preview audiences to test their reactions. There was one prerelease cut of *High Noon* where Tex Ritter came in with the song every time there was a break in the dialogue. About the fourth time, the preview audience started laughing, so—"

Charlie waved his hand impatiently. "It's nothing to do with Tex Ritter. It's that last scene. I distinctly remember Cooper not just dropping the badge but grinding it into the dust with the heel of his boot."

"Never happened," I told him.

"It *did!*"

"Nope. What you remember is how John Wayne always described that scene. He didn't like the picture much."

"Hmm!" Charlie said, not quite convinced but not disputing the matter, like it was a trial judge's ruling he might win on appeal. "I know that's supposed to be a great movie, Seb—I mean, it *is* a great movie, the photography and the acting and the music and the technical stuff and all that, but what's always bothered me about it is, I don't think it's true to history. It's not true to the memory of the kind of people who built the West. Those folks wouldn't have turned their backs on the marshal when trouble came. Seb, what the hell are you grinning about?"

"The Duke said that, too. Thought the picture was un-American."

"Well then, damn it, the Duke was right."

"Have you ever seen this picture before, Charlie, or did you just read an interview about it with John Wayne?"

Not to be diverted, Charlie went on with his jury summation. "The kind of men who won the West wouldn't have hid behind their lace curtains and their womenfolk and their trumped-up excuses at the first sign of trouble. They would have got their gunbelts on and helped the marshal round up Frank Miller and his men. Are they going to turn coward like that all of a sudden, men with the kind of courage to settle the frontier, to deal with untamed deserts and Indians and wild animals and who knows what the hell else to bring civilization to a wild land?"

"Maybe they were just ready to enjoy some of that civilization they'd brought," I said.

Charlie shook his head. "Years later, maybe. Now, for sure. But that close to the time of frontier self-reliance? No way, Seb."

I wasn't sure whether I agreed with Charlie or not. I'd always found the townspeople who wouldn't help the marshal painfully believable. But anyway, I knew something Charlie didn't seem to: *High Noon*

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wasn't about the old West at all. It was about years later, to be exact, Hollywood as it was in the early 1950s.

Seeing the picture again and having that conversation with Charlie set me to thinking back, specifically to the night of the Academy Awards for the best movies of 1952—what that usually means, you realize, is the best American movies in major release that aren't too arty and whose makers are popular (or at least not outcasts) in the industry. One of the Oscars that year presented not a whodunit so much as a who'd-do-it, but the answer just created more questions.

The date was March 19, 1953—that I had to look up; my memory's not that good—and it was raining in L. A. I'd actually attended my share of Oscar ceremonies over the years, and I would again, but that year I wasn't there in person and wasn't really sorry. You see, it was the first year they showed the awards on television.

I was married to Greta at that time, and since TV had started coming on in a big way about five years before, we'd had one of the mellowest periods of our marriage, the numbing effects of the little box, I guess. When she found out the awards would be televised, she had the bright idea we'd play host to an Oscar night party.

In exchange for inviting a few of my movie pals who were also insufficient fry to be on the scene at the RKO Pantages that night, I allowed to darken my modest suburban door Greta's brother Claud, who'd bought one of the first sets that came out after the war and had kept as close to the tube as an asthmatic to his oxygen ever since. Claud had been so warped by television, he seemed almost disappointed when Greta served us real food at a dining room table instead of one of those awful frozen TV dinners on metal trays in the hour and a half before we sat down to watch the show.

The other guests were what I thought would be a congenial lot. Vic Stemmerman was a scrawny, balding, intense sort of guy, a writer of B-grade oaters who'd been trying for years to peddle his own epic Western—we hadn't quite started calling them adult Westerns in those days. Vic's wife, Astrid, was an attractive if hard-edged fortyish blonde, a few years older than he was. She worked as a film editor, one of the few important offscreen roles that, for one reason or another, women were considered capable of filling. Gabe Hanlon was an actor I'd known for years, whose big, muscular frame didn't quite fit with a chronic nervous state that had only got worse in the shaky political climate of fifties Hollywood—picture Arnold Schwarzenegger with a Woody Allen personality. Gabe's one-and-only, Stella Boyle, was a compact brunette, absolutely beautiful and not exactly dumb, who worked in what is now called continuity and whose blatantly sexist title in those days was "script girl." None of the kids were home that night—I can't remember why—so that was the group that sat down to an early dinner, anticipating the program's beginning at seven-thirty. Five guests may be an awkward number socially, but it was perfect for a little contest Greta would unveil with dessert.

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My brother-in-law, of course, was the odd man out. While the rest of us washed down our steaks and baked potatoes with martinis or scotch or California wine—we were pouring Petri, the brand that used to bring Sherlock Holmes on the radio—Claud stuck to his favorite tipple, a cheap beer called Brew 102. Claud was also the one without a partner—his wife Minnie understandably often took vacations from him—and the only one not connected to the movie industry. He appeared alternately fascinated and mystified by the shoptalk flying around the dinner table, which at the moment was running to horror stories.

Stella: "So I told him, that's not the dress she was wearing in the previous scene, and he went after me like it was my fault. You know how he gets. Now John Ford's supposed to be some kind of ogre, but when the same thing happened on *The Quiet Man* over in Ireland, I hear he handled it very differently."

Vic: "I'm working on my tenth Jimmy Lariat Western without a break, and I'm getting stir-crazy. I used to work with a partner, Mack Redmond, but he wanted to move on and now I'm on my own, talking to myself down in the writers' ghetto. Scripting those things didn't really need two of us, I have to admit—we used to say he'd write every other bang. Now a Jimmy Lariat flick is a poverty-row job all the actors and even the horses could do in their sleep, and it's starting to drive me nuts, so I tell the head man, let's show a little originality for a change. Just once, I tell him, let's have the girl's rancher father in league with the bankers and really *wanting* them to foreclose on him, see, because then he has an excuse to leave town with the loot from the payroll robbery he really planned with the owlhoot gang. So the guy across the desk says, 'Jimmy has to know who to shoot.' That's all he says for a minute, and we look at each other. Then he says, 'If Jimmy can't figure the plot out, how can the kids at the Saturday matinee?' Mack, wherever you are, you'd've loved it."

Astrid: "This damn director has it in his contract he gets to look over my shoulder while I'm cutting. The *last* person you want in the cutting room is the goddamn director, especially that guy. When he looks over my shoulder, I don't think he's looking at the Moviola, if you know what I mean. So what's the result? Same picture. It just takes twice as long to cut and I get a sore fanny."

Gabe: "Who can remember what meeting you went to? Hell, I could have gone to some pool party in 1944, and it could have been a Communist cell meeting, and how would I know? They weren't going to tell you. And maybe I went to a benefit during the war for Soviet relief, and then it's supporting our allies in the war and now it's associating with a Communist front organization. What's a guy like me supposed to do?"

As you can see, Gabe was talking a different kind of shop from the other guests, but his was a common topic of conversation those days, at least if you thought you could trust the people you were with. Gabe wasn't the marquee star he wanted to be but he was working regularly and hadn't been called before any Congressional committee. Still, he

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was living in fear. That's what it was like in the Hollywood of the late forties and early fifties.

Silence followed Gabe's little outburst. The women all looked sympathetic. Vic, who was unblacklisted but solidly left of center in his sentiments, muttered, "Don't get me started," poured himself another glass of wine, and shut his trap firmly. Claud was the one to break the discomfort, or maybe redirect it.

"So which picture's going to win tonight?" he asked brightly.

"Which one did you like, Claud?" Astrid asked him with a bright smile, welcoming the change of subject.

"I haven't seen any of them," Claud said, and Astrid's smile faded fast. Claud waded right in and made it worse. "You know what? I don't think I've seen a movie in a theater in four or five years."

"Ever since you got the TV, Claud?" I said.

"What a coincidence. I think you're right. Why don't you folks work in the TV industry? That's where things are really happening."

"Then why did the TV industry pay so much money to put this awards show on, Claud?" I asked. The guy got under my skin, and since he was family (sort of), I could show my irritation in a way my other guests could not. For years, Claud had been prying all the inside industry dope out of me that he could and then chiding me for being a name-dropper. After I split with Greta, I never saw or talked to the guy again.

"Isn't anybody going to answer Claud's question?" Greta asked, hostess-polite but with a slight edge to her voice. She didn't want her brother and me to get into it in front of outsiders. She didn't have to worry, though. She always seemed to think of me as what we'd now call a "loose cannon," but I would have controlled myself in deference to our guests. "Which picture is going to win?"

"Some of the best pictures weren't even nominated," said Vic. "I thought *The Bad and the Beautiful* was pretty good, and *Singin' in the Rain* was terrific."

"Movies about movies never win," Astrid pronounced. "But what about *The Member of the Wedding?"*

"Too classy," her husband pronounced. "I don't know where they got some of the nominees. *Moulin Rouge* is good, though."

"And *The Quiet Man,"* Stella chimed in.

"If I were going to go see just one 1952 picture," said Claud, "what would it be?"

"High Noon," said Gabe quietly. And suddenly there was agreement.

"A great picture," said Vic. "Proves something about Westerns, that they can really make a point and not just be fodder for the kiddies. If the studios see that, it might help me get *mine* off the ground."

"It won't win," I said. "Too political."

"The movies-about-Hollywood rule is against *High Noon,"* Astrid said. "Just like those others."

"But it's a Western," said Stella, and three of my other guests looked at her patronizingly.

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"There is an *editor's* movie," said Astrid, obviously trying again to direct the conversation away from politics. "Elmo Williams should win for editing if nothing else."

"I beg your pardon," said Gabe. "That is an *actor's* tour de force. The movie belongs to Gary Cooper. He was never better in his life."

Astrid nudged her husband kiddingly. "Well, come on, Papa, there aren't any producers or directors present, so isn't that your cue to say a piece for the poor ignored writer?"

Vic wasn't amused. He filled his glass again, peered at each of our faces in turn, and said, "You know what happened there, don't you?"

Astrid apparently realized she had headed him down a path she didn't want to travel, so she introduced another diversion. "Is Coop in town?"

"Nope," said Stella, who apparently kept track of such things. "He's in Mexico, shooting a picture."

"So if he wins, who accepts for him?"

"Carl Foreman," Vic suggested ironically.

"Also out of town, I understand," said Gabe, and a knowing look passed between the two of them.

"I'm betting the producer collects for Cooper," Astrid said. "Stanley Kramer."

Brother-in-law Claud, who had been sipping his Brew 102 and staying pretty quiet through all this, piped up, "I don't think so. That's not good TV." The other guests turned and looked at him like he'd just popped in from Mars. "It has to be an actor, another big star."

"Tex Ritter," said Vic.

"Hoot Gibson," I said.

"Jimmy Lariat," Gabe suggested. At least twitting my brother-in-law had got them off politics for the moment. But Vic wouldn't let it alone.

"You know where Carl Foreman, the writer of *High Noon,* is now?" Vic almost snarled. "He's trying to find a job in England. He's been blacklisted, can't work in his own country."

"Is he a Communist?" Claud asked.

"That's really not the point," Gabe said with strained politeness. "He may have been at one time, but so were a lot of people."

Greta didn't like the way the discussion was turning. This was supposed to be a party, not a debate. She threw me a these-are-your-friends kind of glare, and I did my best to throw back a that's-your-reactionary-brother.

"Hey," I said, "isn't it time for the chocolate Oscars?"

"So it is," Greta said. She disappeared into the kitchen and a moment later returned with a plate of five Oscar shapes wrapped in foil. She invited each guest to take one.

"I couldn't eat another thing," said Stella, "but I'll save it for later."

"No," Greta said, "you have to open it now."

"Aren't you and Seb having anything?" Astrid asked.

"No," I said, "this is just for our guests, to determine who wins the

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grand prize of the evening. So you don't have to eat it, but you do have to take the foil off."

The five of them complied and soon got the point. Between the foil and the chocolate was a slip of white paper, call it a Hollywood fortune cookie, that had the name of one of the five best picture nominees on it.

"Am I stuck with *Quo Vadis?"* Stella said. "Can't I trade for *The Quiet Man?"*

"If the person who drew it wants to trade," Greta said.

Claud held up his slip. "Sure, I'll trade with you."

"Sucker play, Claud," Gabe said. *"Quo Vadis* hasn't got a chance. Now I've got the winner, *High Noon."* He looked to the Stemmermans.

"Moulin Rouge," said Astrid with a shrug.

"Aw, I can't believe it," said Vic. "I might as well go home right now. *The Greatest Show on Earth.* Cecil B. De Mille. The last gasp of a dinosaur. So what's the prize I have no chance of winning?"

"You'll see," said Greta, "after they announce the winner."

It seemed for a moment that Greta had successfully diverted our little gathering back into the party it was meant to be. But her brother Claud promptly undid all her good work.

"Why is it always the writers that get blacklisted?" he asked with bland innocence.

"It's not!" said Vic, a little abruptly. "Of course, the Hollywood Ten got a lot of publicity, but it's actors and directors, all kinds of people in the industry. I guess the witch hunters figure the writers have more of a chance to insert their views into a picture, so naturally they're on the front line, but it's not just writers." He filled his wine glass again. "Writing movies is a shitty profession anyway. I sometimes wish I could just turn my back on it, like Mack did, work on a novel, do some real writing."

"So Carl Foreman was lucky?" Astrid said.

"Hell, no, he wasn't lucky. He got in his last shot before he left, though."

"What do you mean?" Claud asked.

"He was called to Washington, D.C., by the House Un-American Activities Committee, while they were filming *High Noon.* When they asked him if he'd ever been a Communist, he pled the Fifth Amendment, which meant he was guaranteed to be blacklisted by the industry—but not just yet. The movie wasn't finished. There was money on the line. So Foreman had a chance to sneak in some new scenes that heavily underlined just how much this little Western town was like Hollywood. Kramer, the producer, and Zinnemann, the director, knew what he was doing and went along with it. He wrote a scene in the church, where the marshal asks for help and some of the parishioners talk a good fight but in the end nobody will face the outlaws with him. That's how Foreman felt himself when he went to his Hollywood friends. Some high-flown words but in the end, no support. He wrote a scene where one guy who offers help to the marshal backs out when he finds out it will be the two of them alone against the outlaws. Straight

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from life. Straight from chicken-hearted Hollywood." Vic took a breath, looked around a little embarrassed, as if he was afraid he'd said too much. You never knew whom you were talking to.

"Almost seven-thirty," my wife sang out, much too brightly. "Shall we move into the front room?" A lot of drinking had been going on, but we were all steady enough to make it to the mid-century video shrine.

Nowadays people hide their TV sets, but in those days every living room had the tube as its centerpiece. Greta and I urged our guests onto the sofa and easy chairs, all arranged to give a good view of the screen, and brought chairs from the kitchen for ourselves. Our set was a blond-wood Philco, a 21-inch job, big for that time.

On came the show, with a clip from *Wings*, the first Oscar winner back in 1927, followed by a shot of a modern jet and the voice of Ronald Reagan, no stranger to Hollywood politics, who had the thankless job of standing in the rain outside the Pantages and introducing the proceedings. The broadcast was a bicoastal affair, a technological wonder at the time, with the action moving back and forth between the Pantages and the NBC Century Theater in New York. The emcees were a couple of guys with longstanding Oscar-hosting credentials. Conrad Nagel, who had been one of thirty-six founding members of the Academy back in 1927, was in New York, and on our coast was Bob Hope, who hadn't kicked off an Oscar show with one of his monologues since 1946. His disappearance and reappearance represented a kind of politics, too. The film industry had seen television as a bitter enemy, and anybody who appeared in the medium, as Hope had, was seen as a traitor in some quarters. But now that the film industry was, in effect, using television to assist in promoting its product, Hope was again a viable choice.

The comic, of course, got some laughs out of the big- and small-screen rivalry. There was even a grin or two in my living room when he said, "Television—that's where movies go when they die. How about that Jack Warner, he still refers to television as that furniture that stares back."

Vic Stemmerman wasn't enjoying himself, though. Once his blacklist frustrations had been uncorked, he couldn't seem to stop. During the commercials, and sometimes during the musical numbers, he added more to his Carl Foreman story. "So before he decides what to do, Foreman has a meeting with the president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, the Hollywood Red-baiters' club, better known in enlightened circles as the Hedda Hopper Gang. And who, pray tell, is at the head of this estimable organization? None other than John 'Duke' Wayne himself. You know, the guy who won us World War Two."

"Vic, not so loud," Astrid said.

He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper, so if you really wanted to hear the show you could, but most of us were transfixed by Vic. "He didn't meet with Wayne to plead his own case. He wanted the Alliance to get off the back of a press agent who was a friend of his. For associating with Carl Foreman, the Alliance was going after the agent's

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clients. But Wayne, generous and kind-hearted fellow that he is, said Foreman could save his Hollywood career. All he had to do was admit he was wrong, name a few names to show his sincerity, and he'd be back to work in no time. Foreman said no, and Wayne told him he was through in the picture business. Not even his plan of fleeing to Europe could save him—the State Department would pull his passport."

"Didn't happen, did it?" I said.

"Even the great Duke isn't that powerful. But he and his pals ran Foreman out of the country. And you should hear our great war hero on the subject of *High Noon*—most subversive Communist flick since *Song of Russia.* Written in the Kremlin."

Meanwhile our ladies were doing what you're supposed to do when you watch an Oscar show, guessing the winners and commenting on the gowns. Gabe joined them—apparently the conversation's political bent had got too strong for his nervous system. Charles Schnee, who wrote *The Bad and the Beautiful,* snatched the screenplay award from Foreman and another blacklisted writer, Michael Wilson, but music and editing awards went to *High Noon,* encouraging our cheering guests that their favorite might go all the way. But John Ford won the directing award for *The Quiet Man,* and Stella Boyle gave a squeal of delight not appreciated by the *High Noon* partisans, especially when Duke Wayne came up to accept for the absent director.

"The Academy loves Ford," Vic said. "There's still a good chance at best picture."

"Westerns never win," said Astrid darkly.

"*Cimarron,* nineteen thirty-one," said the oldest person in the room. (Me, even then.)

"Okay, now name another. Four directing Oscars now for John Ford and not *one* a Western."

"Best actor will tell us a lot," Gabe said. "If Coop wins that, best picture will follow."

"I hope you're right, because Cooper's gonna win," Vic said. "But who picks it up for him? It has to be somebody who's big enough to stand the political heat."

"Nobody's that big," Gabe muttered.

"What political heat?" Stella asked, sounding exasperated. "Nobody thinks Gary Cooper's a Communist, do they?"

"No," I said, "but Coop was the one big star to support Foreman—till Warners told him they'd invoke the 'morals clause' in his contract if he kept it up."

"Yeah," said Vic. "So he was the guy in the movie who was going to fight the baddies with the marshal until he found out everybody else was staying home."

I was getting a little annoyed with Vic's black and white view of things. "He might have gone to the wall, but Foreman couldn't ask it of him."

"Real heroes don't do heroic things because they're asked," Vic pontificated. "They do them because of who they are."

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"You oughta give that line to Jimmy Lariat," Astrid said, "if he could remember that many words in a row. Or maybe that kind of dialogue was more Mack Redmond's line."

Vic threw his wife a poisonous look. This was proving a shaky night for the Stemmerman marriage. For the first time, it registered on me that Astrid was matching Vic drink for drink and they had both become more visibly intoxicated than the rest of us.

Then as now, the usual practice was for the previous year's best actress to present the best actor award, and vice versa, but Vivien Leigh was indisposed—we later found out she had suffered a sudden mental breakdown—and it was the old trouper Janet Gaynor who handled the chore of reading the nominees and announcing the winner. My living room was silent, all our eyes intent on the oblong box, a portrait of mid-century American social life. I think all of us were pulling for Gary Cooper, whatever we thought about whether he had or hadn't supported Carl Foreman. It had been a great acting job, and any honor for *High Noon* made a kind of statement.

She announced the winner. Yup, it was Gary Cooper, for *High Noon.* The only question now: Who would come up to the mike and accept the award?

"I don't believe it," said Gabe. "What—what does it mean?"

"How can he have the nerve—?" Vic exploded.

"Shut up, Vic," said Astrid. "Let's hear what he has to say."

Holding Gary Cooper's Oscar, John Wayne faced the Pantages crowd and (thanks to the dreaded TV) the biggest Oscar audience in history. In that unmistakable, often-imitated delivery, he said, "I'm glad to see they're giving this to a man who has conducted himself throughout his years in this business in a manner that we can all be proud of him. And now, I'm going to go back and find my business manager, agent, producer, and three name writers—"

"Try looking in England, Duke, where you sent a pretty good one," Vic muttered, and Astrid promptly shushed him.

"—and find out why I didn't get *High Noon* instead of Cooper. Since I can't fire any of these very expensive fellas, I can at least run my nineteen-thirty Chevrolet into one of their big new black Cadillacs."

My living room fell silent until the next commercial. Then Vic said, "What a hypocrite."

Stella said, "He's just being a good sport." She must have loved him in *The Quiet Man.*

"He's big enough to admit he's wrong," Astrid offered.

"He's a loyal industry guy, showing his best face to an audience of millions," I opined, and I still think it's the best explanation.

"He's just honoring another right-wing Red-baiter," Gabe said, "wherever the script might have come from. Coop's a member of the Alliance too, you know."

"What a hypocrite," Vic repeated.

"Who wants coffee?" my apolitical wife wailed.

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Best actress was anticlimactic. We barely registered that Broadway star Shirley Booth won for *Come Back, Little Sheba* and stumbled on her way up to the podium in New York. But we still had our little best-picture lottery going. With its commendable sense of history, the Academy had asked Mary Pickford to present the award. We all leaned toward the tube as she opened the envelope. Gabe was nervously humming "Do not forsake me, oh my darling," maybe unaware he was doing it.

The winner was *The Greatest Show on Earth,* produced and directed by Cecil B. De Mille, a major financial success but (in my pretty well-informed opinion) the poorest movie ever to win top honors.

"Looks like you're the big winner, darling," Astrid said to her husband, not pleasantly.

Vic gaped at the screen. "I can't believe they could—aw hell, what's my prize anyway?"

"How about thirty pieces of silver?" Astrid said.

Vic stared at his wife. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

Suddenly it was as if the rest of us weren't even in the room. "Don't get on that subject, Astrid."

"Don't get on it? I've been trying to stay the hell off it all evening, but not you. It's blacklist this, blacklist that. It seems to me you'd keep off that subject without my having to keep nudging you."

"Mack wanted to get out of pictures, Astrid. He wanted to work on his short stories and his novels and his plays. He told me so plenty of times. And he'd already been named to the committee by three other people before I—"

Vic stopped himself, as if realizing he and Astrid weren't alone in the room. He looked around at each of us, looked down at the carpet.

Our other guests took the hint about the coffee—Claud even laid off his Brew 102—but Vic helped himself to another drink. Astrid accepted a ride home from Gabe and Stella, so we wound up giving Vic a bed for the night, a necessity to which Greta's reaction was anything but mellow. I don't think we ever gave Vic his prize for drawing the chocolate Oscar with the best-picture winner. And, though I'm proud of my memory, I'm damned if I remember what the real prize was.

The last thing the Poverty Row oatersmith mumbled as I tucked him into the guest-room bed was, "Jimmy's gotta know who to shoot." Even forty-some years later, it's hard to look back at that time and know who to shoot, but I'll add one interesting fact. Carl Foreman sort of liked John Wayne, even when the Duke was running him out of the country. I guess that's what you call star quality.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The following sources were helpful in research for this story: Anthony Holden, *Behind the Oscar* (Simon and Schuster, 1993); Donald Shepherd and Robert Slatzer, *Duke: The Life and Times of John Wayne* (Doubleday, 1985); Mason Wiley and Damien Bona, *Inside Oscar* (Ballantine, 1986).

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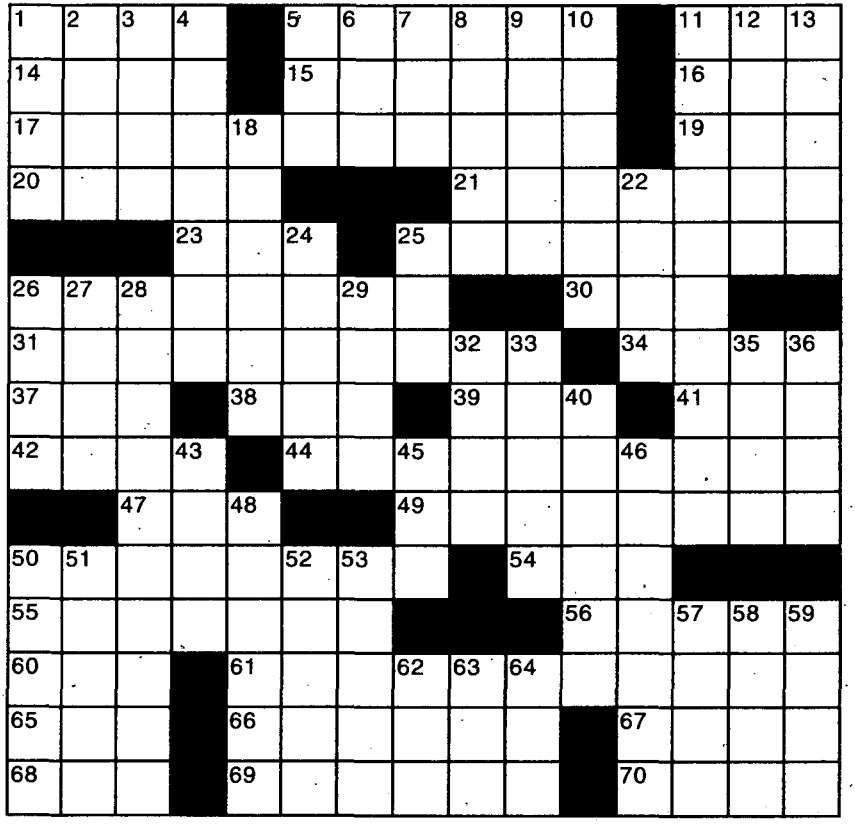
Cockeyed Collaborations

by Leigh Woznick



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ACROSS

1 Grave filler
5 Footless
11 British mugger's weapon
14 Roof edge
15 Love of Jean-Paul
16 Panay pagan
17 Lionel and Kathleen rewriting Gawain
19 Coffin slang
20 "To Fear a Painted ___"

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(Rendell)
21 Television's redeeming feature
23 Hoch and McBain
25 A.A. and John take up sportswriting
26 Hang of
30 Grandmother's directive
31 Travel writing by Amanda and John
34 Missile shelter
37 Suffer
38 Hanger for morgue tag
39 "... ___ de-lovely"—Porter
41 Cow's seconds
42 Vegas voltage
44 Ngaio and Frances pen an aviary murder
47 Milne character
49 West Indian cherries
50 Jack and Marco, on the Net
54 Lorraine lily
55 Detective's bulge
56 Toward the middle
60 Baba, for one
61 Gardening column by Pat and Jean
65 Japanese monetary unit
66 Mystery writer D.B. and family
67 ___ Land (hardboiled Hollywood)
68 Local's usurper
69 Cut out, as a coroner
70 Mine shaft

DOWN

1 Salacious
2 Missouri river dam
3 Half an Israeli city
4 Vocations
5 Inquire
6 Wrestler's goal
7 Japanese lake
8 Religious tenets
9 Chinese province
10 Missive for 15 across
11 Professor's seven-year itch?
12 Bora-Bora, for one
13 Picture element
18 Heir apparent
22 Down with: French
24 Senator Thurmond
25 Noted chef Susanna
26 Browse
27 Albany-Buffalo route
28 Unprejudiced
29 Genus of tropical evergreen
32 Business end of a plow
33 Lucy's foil
35 Moon over Marcellus
36 Poems
40 Pinch pennies
43 Cribbage jacks
45 Scottish arctic explorer
46 Spotty childhood ailment
48 Elect
50 Port attribute
51 Italian island group
52 First Sussex king
53 Supply number
57 Myron Bolitar haunt, for short?
58 Legendary king of the Huns
59 Grisham character's test
62 Adjective for a bairn
63 Not. on a letter
64 Alphabet sequence

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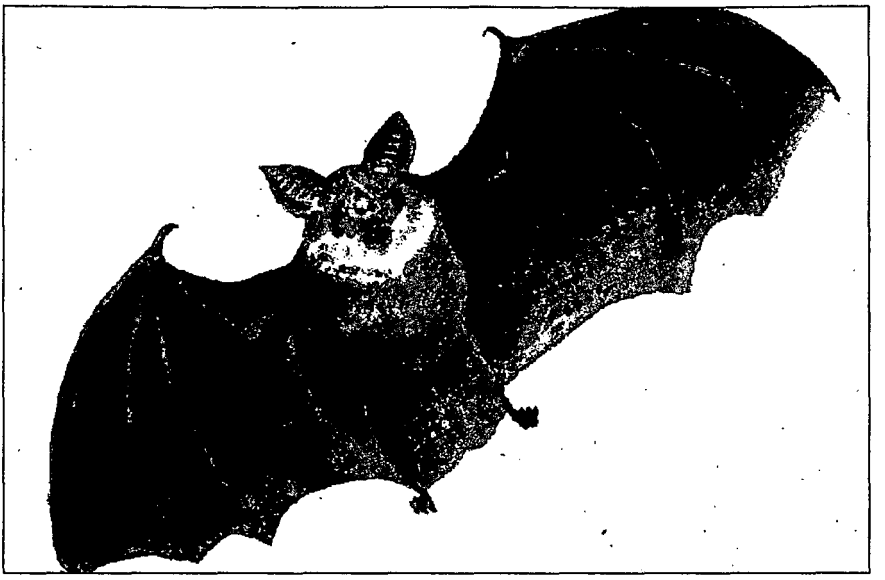

NIGHT OF THE BAT

by Suzanne Jones

It was early in the evening in the middle of the dry season in 1951. Nicholas Romero lay slumped in the bamboo lounge chair on the screened-in veranda of the house which he shared with Aberdeen. He was trying to distinguish the whine of a mosquito from the chug of the overhead fan while sipping his second gin and tonic of the evening. Some evenings he had only two, but this evening he knew he would have more.

He was listening as well to the sharp, irregular ticks of the tin roof as it contracted in the night air, though he could detect little cooling in the temperature. His shirt was glued to the back of the chair with his sweat. He was alone, but the heat gave the night a presence as palpable as a hot breath.

The moon had already risen in the east and was ascending the starless sky, shining like a lump of bone, its arid light leeching the color from the landscape, whitening the sand that separated the shadowy houses, each identical to its neighbor along the row as far as Nicholas could see. The moonlight lay on the tin roofs of the houses like a dusting of ash. In most, wan lights glowed because the day-shift men were home from the refinery by now.

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Nicholas, however, was lying in the dark, because he felt that it was cooler with the lights off. He let each sip of gin distance him a little more from the frustrations of the day: the whining Stephens child, whom he had caught reading past the assigned chapter. How many books did she think they had? *Robinson Crusoe* was a long book. It should last her all year, but not at that rate. The Pettijohn twins, whom he was afraid to leave alone with the child. They were thirteen but large for their age and good at math. He didn't trust them. They were the sort of boys who drowned kittens and tortured puppies given half the chance. They reminded him of his brothers. But he found it difficult to keep track of all twelve of his charges at recess. They were forever straying off and doing God knows what to each other.

Like her February '98 story "Club Champion," Suzanne Jones's latest offering is set in Sumatra, a country she knows firsthand from her childhood travels in the company of her father, who was employed at oil fields in the region. Ms. Jones can set a foreign scene and create an exotic atmosphere like no one else. Her current home is in Boulder, Colorado, where she golfs, plays duplicate bridge, and writes for *EQMM*.

The only good students were the ninth graders, in that they were generally well behaved and seemed content to do only what he required of them. Most of their time was spent in giggling and exchanging notes. And there were only the two girls in that grade, one of whom was the daughter of the assistant to the plant manager. Sometimes he thought they fancied him.

He smiled mirthlessly. Of course they did. Him almost forty, with his softly swelling stomach, lumbering gait, and blue jaw. But he still had most of his own hair, and his hands were well shaped, though he cleaned his fingernails so often and so scrupulously that he had eroded the flesh beneath the nails a quarter of an inch, which gave his fingers an odd, foreshortened look. He cleaned his nails now with the good file, slowly, methodically, feeling the slight discomfort which was as familiar to him as brushing his teeth. He held his hands up to catch the moonlight. Pale, but clean. Perfectly clean. And he knew he had beautiful eyes. "Just look at those eyes!" Mama used to say. "My Nicky has the eyes of an angel! The girls will lose themselves in those eyes!" Not that many ever had.

He fingered the battered manila envelope that lay on his stomach. Its scarcely perceptible weight pressed down on him painfully, as though it were bruising his flesh. The edge of the envelope was roughly scalloped where he had torn it in his haste.

He was thinking of his mother. He often did. And of the messy little dog she'd owned and loved to distraction. He sometimes wished, for her

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sake, that he had been more like her other sons, that her Nicky had been an energetic, bubbling man with a wife and many children to brutalize casually, with a family who would grow old with him and honor him in his old age. Instead he was growing old with the children of strangers, and more womanlike each year, soft, indolent. Alone.

He remembered with fondness the Nicky who yearned for adventure, to travel to a golden shore, to go on a quest in a far-off land where he would do deeds to make Mama proud. He was like a son now, the memory of this boy who wanted to leave the row upon row of stone houses, joined with common walls and bleak likeness. The men would sit on the front steps in their shirt-sleeves, smoking, waiting for dinner on a Sunday evening. Sometimes they talked about the Dodgers.

But there the boy had stayed and grown and lived for a long time. He had been the youngest and least successful of five sons. But Mama had been devoted to him, had protected him against his brothers' enmities, had comforted him, cared for him. So he stayed on with her after Papa died, continuing to live in the old house connected to the others while his brothers moved out, married, sired children, and made their ways in the world.

He got a job in a nearby bookstore, took a class or two at night, and read sentimental novels to Mama on other evenings. One day he saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a teacher with an oil company in Sumatra. Degree preferred but not required. He had a vague idea that was a country somewhere in the East Indies. He looked it up in the atlas in the public library.

He discovered that Sumatra wasn't a country, that it was only an island, though it was the second-largest island in Indonesia. Long and narrow, pink against the pale blue paper of the Indian Ocean. He remembered touching the surface of the map lightly, wondering at the colors the cartographer had chosen: pale yellow for Malaysia, pale green for Thailand, gold for Laos and the Philippines.

He answered the advertisement and went for the interview, which was at an office in East Orange. He did not tell his mother. It was a lark, really. Over the years he had accumulated only enough credits to be a college junior, far short of the degree they "preferred." But he was curious to meet someone who had been to such a far-off place, who had seen mysteriously veiled women who smelled of sandalwood.

In that, he was disappointed. The man who interviewed him had never been there. "Actually" is the way he had put it. Never been there, actually.

The position paid a great deal of money. Over twice as much as the bookstore. Nicholas hadn't thought of teaching as a way to make his living. He had taken the job at the bookstore because it was near his home and required no previous experience. The classes he had taken at night, mostly to please his mother, were mainly those which were prerequisites for a degree in English. She liked to tell their neighbors, "My Nicky, he studies at night to *be* somebody."

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He liked the reading. The writing courses were more demanding, but he had done well enough in them. He had taken no courses in education.

The trip out of the city was long and tiring, and he hadn't thought the interview went particularly well. Nicholas was more interested in Sumatra than in the position, and the man didn't know much about Sumatra except that it was difficult to find teachers for the children of the American workers there. Nicholas thought that was the end of it, but three weeks later, on heavy bond stationery imprinted with the oil company logo, came the offer, with too much money to refuse. His mother had paled at the sight of the figure.

"You can do this, Nicky?" she asked, her voice quivering. "You can be a teacher?"

He didn't know. He thought so. His own teachers had been old women whose stumpy legs ended in swollen ankles and laced-up oxfords. He thought he could do as well as they had. Papa had been a Freemason and hadn't wanted his sons to go to the nuns, and in the end, he had gotten Mama to agree with him. Nicholas had always been grateful. Ravenlike and dour, the nuns frightened him.

The night after the letter came, he lay awake, trying to imagine what his life would be like in such a remote part of the world. He was a little afraid of teaching, that he might not know enough, or not be able to tell what he did know, but he was also excited to think of sending his pupils out into the world to make it better, of their becoming someone and making him and Mama proud.

The contract the company offered was for two years with a local leave after six months, and a home leave of thirty days after a year. After her initial dismay, even his mother became excited about the money. There was no income tax for Americans who worked abroad in those days.

"Only for two years, Mama," he promised her. "We'll get you a new refrigerator. A new stove too. And I'll be back before you know it. Only a year until I can come home for a good long visit."

But the dog died six months after he left, and his mother died shortly thereafter.

The company flew Nicholas home to bury his mother and be consoled by his brothers, who bullied him as much as ever. He knew they blamed him for her death. He cut his leave short to get away from them.

And that golden shore?

He remembered his disappointment the first time he had flown over the jungle from Jakarta to Palembang, looking down from the company plane on the tall, spindly, small-leaved trees harshly lit by a suffocating sun, a landscape more gray than green from that height. In the dense tangle of brush beneath those trees, nothing moved in the heat except for the occasional flash of a bird. There was little resemblance to the lush green jungles of the Tarzan movies, to the back lots of Hollywood with which he had fleshed out his fantasies.

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Though the religion of the island was Islam, the beautiful veiled women belonged to some other place or some other time. The Indonesian women wore sarongs, had skin the color of café au lait and dark eyes, but had broad noses and were squat in stature. Most were built very like his mother and her friends. Though he was seldom near enough to notice, they did smell faintly of sandalwood.

Since Sumatra was an island, he had imagined white sands, gently undulating palm trees, and crystalline seas, but the island was so large it might as well have been a continent. The American camp was locked in its interior on the banks of the Musi River, far from the cooling breeze of any ocean.

The first tour became the second almost before he knew it. He got over his initial discomfiture and became accustomed to the repetitive task of teaching, although he found he did not like children very much. Far from receiving his wisdom gratefully, they were often unreasonable and stubbornly clung to their own opinions. He sometimes wished he had paid more attention to his own teachers, how they got through the day. In the beginning he had thought of himself as being responsible for shaping the lives of the children, for nurturing them and making them better. Later, he would liken teaching to trying to cultivate rootless plants in stony soil.

He confided these thoughts not to his mother, for she was dead by then, but to a series of men on single status with whom he had to share his quarters. Even married men had to work a year at the refinery in Sumatra before the company would send out their families. Nicholas didn't mind. He was used to living with someone.

However, the least agreeable of these arrangements was of the longest duration.

Aberdeen was a Texan who had three ex-wives to support should he go back to the States. Since he felt it was not possible to support all three and their several children, he signed up for tour after tour to put himself out of their reach. He was a small, wiry man in his forties who wore cowboy boots to make himself taller and did something or other in the cracking plant at the refinery. He was taciturn except when drinking, when he was given to boasting of his state of origin and his golf, which he played intensely, enthusiastically, and wretchedly.

He and Nicholas had been together for almost two years. Each had his own bedroom. They shared the rest of the small house.

Aberdeen kept his golf clubs in the corner just inside the front door, and seized his putter the moment he came home from the plant. The first time Nicholas, lying on the veranda, had seen the ball rolling across the floor from behind him, he thought it was a rat. His startled reaction had been a source of considerable amusement to the Texan, who continued to try to surprise Nicholas long after his shock at the incident had worn off. Nicholas would find the ball scurrying past him as he walked down the hall, or scooting through a crack in the bathroom door while he was shaving.

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Aberdeen also fancied himself a hunter, although all he had to show for that infrequent activity was the small head of an unhappy-looking deer which he had shot in the mountains with a .22 and had mounted at some expense by a taxidermist in Palembang.

Nicholas tried never to look at the deer. He had a deep tenderness toward animals, which was why he did not get himself a pet. He couldn't bear to suffer a loss like that of his mother's dog again. He couldn't understand how his neighbors could abandon their animals so casually when they ended their tours for good. The quarantine laws were too strict, they said. It was too difficult to transport the animals back to the States, they said. So someone would take them in or, more often than not, drown them in the Musi.

It was hard to know exactly when the desire to return home began to tug at Nicholas. Perhaps it had always been there beneath the surface of his daily life, a warm current waiting to bear him back to the past. Where his mother would pile his plate with ravioli and tortellini, and dessert was the sugary wafers that she baked herself. Though he knew very well he could not go home again, the yearning grew year by year.

He began to think of leaving Sumatra for good. He had what seemed like a lot of money put aside. However, when he went on his home leave to the city, he found things to be shockingly expensive. His brothers and their noisy families were going on with their lives without him. His home was gone. His mother's house had been sold to a younger cousin.

Without an inexpensive place to live, he would scarcely be able to support himself with a job in a bookstore. While teaching, even teaching in the States, paid more than any bookstore, teaching jobs were difficult to come by without a degree. As he discovered by making a few telephone calls from his room in the Lexington Hotel, which was also very expensive. He found the city very noisy and uncomfortably crowded.

It was painful to return to the camp, even so. The sight of the jungle below the company plane sank his spirits and filled him with desolation. Looming before him was not only the heat of the dry season, when it was so difficult to breathe, and the months where the hard, driving rain came with numbing predictability—but the children. The omnipresent, unnurturable children.

"You can set your watch by when the rain comes," Aberdeen would say with satisfaction time and time again during each and every rainy season—as predictably as the rain itself.

That was but one of the irritating things about Aberdeen. There were others: his chain smoking, untidy personal habits, his meanness when he drank, the Texas braggadocio. However, Nicholas had actually come to admire Aberdeen's mindless passion for golf.

He admired it because there seemed to be so very little passion in the camp otherwise. No wife conceived here, though few were past childbearing age. Nicholas used to wonder about it and found some irony in the essential sterility of the camp in the midst of all that fecundity: the

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fertile jungle, the Musi teeming with God knows what beneath its roiling, muddy waters as it made its way to the Java Sea. They said that downriver the Musi was full of crocodiles, but he had never been downriver.

There was golf for the men and bridge for their wives. Nicholas found golf frustrating, and his lack of coordination embarrassed him. After a few abortive efforts, he did not play, though he sometimes regretted that the only exercise he got was in cycling to and from the schoolhouse five days a week. Or to the club, or the ferry. And it meant, of course, that the only adult with whom he had contact was Aberdeen or the odd parent.

When Nicholas had first come to Sumatra, he had sometimes ridden the ferry across the Musi to wander through the markets of Palembang, but not often. The crowd of natives who jostled their way through the narrow streets there he found a little frightening, since he knew only a few words of the language. He tried to find someone from the camp to go with him, but no one had much interest. All the Americans had cooks who did the shopping. No one could see much reason to do their job for them. So Nicholas had to content himself with the food his servants placed in front of him: rice and stringy chicken or (rarely) beef. Noodles. Green beans out of a can. Powdered milk. There was little pleasure in it.

The one consolation that he found in living abroad was that it effectively removed him from the Church. From confession. From Sunday in the city, which had been the dullest day of the week as a boy, a day spent mostly crouched in the darkness of the parish church, placating his mother and her God and feeling guilty most of the time. Weakly jealous of the power of the priest.

Shortly after he had arrived in the camp, he had been contacted by the priest from Palembang. He had not, however, made the effort to cross the river and find the church. Eventually, the guilt he felt at not attending mass dropped away. He supposed his mother's priest was dead by now. Father Forquet. He had been a frail old man when he had conducted the Mass for his mother's soul. Years ago. He thought of the dead priest without regret. He had wasted many an hour of Nicholas's life.

He sipped his gin and lightly fingered the envelope on his stomach.

It seemed to him that he had gradually become a prisoner, confined to the narrow pound of the camp, which the company had made by filling in a swamp with sand. Now the camp lay along the great river like a sandy shoal, and, he suspected, just as temporary.

The oil itself would not last forever, but long before it ran out, he thought the political situation would destabilize and end the American presence on the island. The communists were becoming more vocal daily, demanding more of a voice in the government. He heard several of their meetings in Palembang had ended in violence.

And then what?

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The banging open of the living room door announced Aberdeen's arrival. Friday afternoons he usually played golf, even in the rain if it wasn't too intense. Then he and the others in his foursome would drink themselves blind at the club. Friday evenings Nicholas usually had the house to himself.

"You're back early," Nicholas said without enthusiasm, or getting up. "Anything wrong?"

"Mahmoud!" Nicholas heard him bellow. "Gin and tonic. Chop, chop, you lazy bastard."

Nicholas heard the familiar rattle of the clubs as Aberdeen deposited them in the corner by the door. He closed his eyes. He could picture Aberdeen pulling out the putter and sending the ball scuttling across the living room mat. As usual.

But Aberdeen came onto the veranda and switched on the light. Nicholas put his hand to his eyes to shield them.

"Lying around in the dark again, eh, Professor?"

Nicholas heard Aberdeen light a cigarette with the leaky lighter that he kept in his breast pocket, making all his shirts smell like lighter fluid.

"It's cooler in the dark," Nicholas said, wishing Aberdeen would turn out the light.

"Not good for you, you know," Aberdeen said from the doorway. "Turns a man in on himself. I should know."

Aberdeen considered himself a tragic figure, kept from his homeland by vindictive women and obdurate courts.

Nicholas rubbed his eyes irritably, blinking slowly at the light which rendered the screen enclosing the veranda black and all but opaque. "Why home so early?" he asked. "Don't tell me they closed the bar."

In his experience, the club bar had never been closed, not even for religious holidays. Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter, all passed without notice except for a red-felt Santa Claus someone had bought one year in Singapore which the native bartender propped against the bar mirror whenever he was told to do so. Sometimes it appeared on Halloween.

"Didn't stop off at the bar. Swung by Ellington's on my way home. Goddammit, Mahmoud! Where's my bloody drink?"

Not stopping in the bar after the round of golf was sufficiently odd for Nicholas to sit up and turn to look at the Texan.

"What's that?" Nicholas asked uneasily.

"What does it look like? It's a shotgun, mate. Twenty-gauge. A beauty. It's one of Ellington's. And that's why we had to leave the ruddy club early. We're getting ready to go after the bats and need to keep a keen eye and a steady hand tonight. Jack's lent me one of his because my little pop gun won't make a proper job of it."

Aberdeen had lived with an Australian for a year before the company moved him in with Nicholas, and affected an Aussie accent when he had been drinking, which was fairly often.

Nicholas shook his head. "Bats?"

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"It was Freddie Baker what saw them last night. Hundreds of them—hell's bells—thousands of them. He says they've been flying over the camp now every night for a week. They're on their way to orchards up north. Fruit bats. Wing span of five feet or more. Big as dogs. So big they call them flying foxes. We're going to give them quite a greeting tonight, I can tell you!"

"Why?" Nicholas asked. "I mean, what for?"

Aberdeen looked at him blankly. "What do you mean, what for?" The question seemed to baffle him. "Why, to save the bloody orchards, that's why. That's what they're after. The fruit."

"What orchards?"

"How would I know? Some orchards somewhere. That's what they eat."

"I haven't seen any bats."

Or any orchards, for that matter.

"I haven't either, but Freddie's seen plenty of the bastards. He says they're hard to pick out when there's no moon. Too cloudy last night. There's a beaut of a moon tonight, though. Bomber's moon. Plenty of light."

He raised the shotgun to his shoulder and sighted toward the moon, which seemed to be shrinking in its corner of the sky.

The houseboy set the large gin and tonic on the table next to the chair that had become Aberdeen's by habit. Mahmoud looked at Nicholas questioningly. The dark irises seemed to float in the yellow of the houseboy's eyes. Nicholas nodded. Yes, he would have another. Chop, chop.

"So where are you planning this ambush of God's creatures?" Nicholas asked.

"God's creatures!" Aberdeen snorted and frowned at him. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you, mate? If they're God's creatures, they're the last He made, all right. They look like imps from hell, they do. Evil things. Big ears and teeth sharp as needles. Freddie's got a picture of one." Aberdeen paused and grinned wolfishly at him. "Well, that's the beauty of it, Professor. We've only to step out into our front yard."

"*Our* front yard?" Nicholas was now alarmed. Why couldn't Aberdeen go off somewhere with his friends to do his shooting? "Why *our* front yard?"

"Because we're the last house before the fence," Aberdeen explained. "According to Freddie, they won't pass over the camp until almost midnight, and then we're going to be making enough racket to wake the dead. Like to let the manager get his beauty sleep, we would."

Nicholas nodded uneasily. The manager's bungalow was several miles away at the opposite end of the camp, near the refinery.

"And we don't want them falling in the middle of the camp and some kid coming on one we've missed picking up," Aberdeen continued. "Could be rabid, you know."

"You're going to pick up rabid bats?"

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"As a matter of fact, no. Our job is just to shoot them down. Freddie made a deal with his cook. Pays him so much per bat to cart them off. He thinks the cook will turn around and sell them to the Chinks to make into soap or shoes or whatever the hell they can think of. Industrious bastards. He's bringing a truck tonight from across the river."

Nicholas twisted in his chair to look for Mahmoud and his drink. As he did so, the envelope slid from his stomach to the floor. Aberdeen bent to pick it up.

He rested the butt of the gun on his hip and studied the corner of the envelope which bore the stamp of the South Dakota State Board of Education. He shook his head.

"Shot down again, eh, Professor?"

Nicholas nodded. "Same old, same old." He took the fresh drink gratefully from Mahmoud. "Need some education hours. Need a degree in education, preferably. Some degree in something."

"Can't see the why of it myself," Aberdeen said, tossing the envelope aside. "Here you are a teacher, teaching American kids. Seems like if you're good enough to do it here, you ought to be good enough to teach American kids in America."

Nicholas nodded and sipped his drink. "Seems like."

But no state board of education had agreed so far. There weren't many he hadn't tried.

" 'Course you might not be."

"Might not be what?" Nicholas asked.

"Good enough," Aberdeen said, sighting again at the moon along the barrel of the shotgun. The cigarette was hanging from the corner of his mouth, and he squinted through the smoke, his face as yellow and wizened as an old apple.

"How would we know if you were or not? No one checks up on you, do they, Professor? Not like down at the plant. Old Sullivan is peering over my shoulder often enough, letting me have what for."

"I'm all right," Nicholas said testily. "Nobody complains." Almost nobody. He hadn't had a complaint in years.

"The dog that don't bark can still say plenty." Aberdeen left off aiming at the moon to look at Nicholas. "Oh, don't pull such a face. What difference does it make? They're not likely to ship you out of here anytime soon, now are they?"

Nicholas continued to scowl at Aberdeen as he got up and snapped off the light on the veranda, but he supposed Aberdeen was right. Whether he was a good teacher or a bad one was largely irrelevant. Who would take his place?

But he brooded on it as he watched the moon cross the sky and heard the DDT trucks come and go, laying out their mosquito-killing mist along the road in front of the house.

Aberdeen eventually tired of fussing with the gun and got out the putter. From his chair on the darkened veranda, Nicholas could hear the click it made as it struck the ball and the whisper the ball made as

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it scurried across the living room mat. Occasionally it would strike the rim of the glass set out for it or, more rarely, go in, and Aberdeen would grunt with satisfaction.

Nicholas had resolved to go to bed before the shoot, but found himself still up when he heard the clatter of the truck outside. Aberdeen threw open the door excitedly.

"They're here already, Professor! Come see what a mob!"

The road in front of the house was cluttered with men and bicycles and an old, battered Ford pickup. To Nicholas's surprise, he saw the Pettijohn twins in the crowd.

"What are they doing here?" he demanded of Aberdeen. "They're just children."

"Why shouldn't they be here if old Pettijohn wants his sons to bag a few bats? Good for lads to know how to shoot."

"It's awfully late," Nicholas protested.

"Not a school night, Mr. Romero," one of the twins pointed out. Bud, Nicholas thought. Bruce was the taller, thinner one. They both wore glasses, and their mother still dressed them alike: T-shirts, khaki shorts.

"We can stay up all night," his brother agreed. "Tomorrow's Saturday."

The excitement of the men was almost tangible. They circled the sickly banana tree (which Nicholas had planted a few years ago but which had never done very well in the sand) and stared up at the inky sky. Most of the men had already broken out their weapons, and were aiming them at the moon, which had shrunk to the size of a thumbnail, but was still so bright that it obscured the stars. In front of the house the shadows of the men were sharply cast. All was in black and white except for the pale yellow light that leaked through the window blinds of the house and from the servants' quarters.

It seemed that half the men in camp were waiting in the front yard, shuffling their feet and raising their guns to the moon. Nicholas noticed that their own cook and houseboy had joined the natives sitting in the back of the truck. They were jabbering among themselves.

Aberdeen brought out a couple of bottles of gin and passed them among the white men. Nicholas saw one of the men jerk the bottle out of one of the twins' hands (Bud?) and send the bottle on.

In the excitement, Nicholas lost interest in going to bed. He doubted he could get any sleep anyway with the racket they were bound to make.

He decided to ignore the twins. He pretended not to hear when they snickered something about "Mr. Romeo," and turned away even when he saw one of them tuck a bottle beneath his shirt and disappear behind the servants' quarters.

One of the men strode restlessly up the road toward the chain-link fence that surrounded the camp. The fence was ten feet high and topped by barbed wire which angled over the jungle side. In the bright

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moonlight, Nicholas was easily able to follow the man's progress until he reached the locked gate and was swallowed in the shadows cast there by the jungle. Nicholas tried to remember if he had ever walked to the gate and peered through it. Or where the road went after it left the camp. As far as he knew, the gate had never been unlocked.

"Not long now," one of the men said. There was some grumbling and nervous laughter from the others.

Then the man at the gate suddenly rushed into the moonlight and came running toward them. "They're coming," he shouted. As if to confirm his statement, he stopped and fired wildly into the air.

Suddenly they were all firing. Nicholas put his hands over his ears. Besides the boom of the guns and the excited shouts of the men, Nicholas began to hear a new sound: the heavy thud of the bodies striking the ground. The smell of cordite hung in the heavy air. The men stopped firing only to reload.

Nicholas could see them now, the black shapes against the slate-gray sky. Not hundreds, but many, many shapes. He walked unsteadily onto the oiled road, looking up in wonder at the large bats streaming overhead. He imagined himself rushing past the dark earth as if it were a dream, sweeping the air with his great wings, surrounded by his fellows, secure in the night and distance. Then, watching the sky grow larger as all around him his kindred began to fall.

"Professor, come see this!" Aberdeen called to him as the shapes overhead vanished and the shots at last died out.

The natives now were everywhere, shouting at each other, pointing, scooping up the dark mounds with shovels from the surface of the road and the sand and tossing them in the back of the truck.

Some of the men got on their bicycles and began to pedal furiously along the road to get one last shot before the bats passed beyond the camp.

"Come on, Professor," Aberdeen said impatiently. "Get a load of this. Here's one of God's creatures for you. Come see His bloody work for yourself!"

Freddie's cook, his yellow grin splitting his dark face, held a shovel beneath the banana tree. When he took it away with a flourish as if performing a conjurer's trick, the bat was clinging to one of the fronds, hanging upside down, bending it beneath its weight.

As Nicholas neared the banana tree, he could see that the bat was working at its right wing with its pointed, foxlike muzzle. Nicholas heard the crunch of its teeth, saw the splinters of bone shining wetly in the nest of rubbery flesh. Black drops poured steadily from the wing to the sand at the base of the tree.

Its dark body was as big as his mother's dog. Nicholas stared at it, speechless. The creature which had glided so majestically through the night sky was now reduced to this mangled thing by Aberdeen and his friends.

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"What's it doing?" Aberdeen asked, leaning closer to get a better look. "Eating itself? Mahmoud, bring a light!"

"When they're hit," Freddie explained, "they bite their wings to break the bones—so that the fall will kill them. It's all instinct, of course. They say they'll just keep on chewing away until the whole wing drops off."

"Suicide," Aberdeen said. "Well, I'll be goddamned!"

The flashlight cast a yellow light over the banana tree and gleamed in the bat's dull eyes. Nicholas could see now that the bat was dark brown, rather than black. The wet patches on its body and the drops falling from its leathery wing were bright red.

As Nicholas stared at the bat, something seemed to break hotly within him, all of the feeling he had for all the suffering things of the earth: for Mama and her dog. For himself.

"It wants to die," Nicholas said.

He felt his heart wrench within him, and the tears sting his eyes. He sank to his knees.

"Kill it! For God's sake, please just kill it!"

The men just looked at him.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Professor. It's only a bat, for christsake," Aberdeen said.

Nicholas heard a roaring in his ears and felt as though his heart would burst.

"Let me do it, Dad," said one of the twins, who had materialized by the banana tree. "Let me kill it."

The cook rolled his eyes uncertainly at Pettijohn, who shook his head in distaste. The cook knocked the bat out of the tree and pounded it with the shovel against the cement walk. Then he scooped it up and tossed it in the back of the truck.

"Satisfied?" Aberdeen asked Nicholas sourly. "You can stop your blubbering now."

"I want the head, Dad. Could we have the skull of one of them?" one of the twins asked.

"And the claws. Its feet. Please, can we?" asked the other (Bruce?).

"Naw," their father said. "The native boys want them. Besides, they're probably diseased."

Nicholas closed his eyes but could not stop crying. He stayed on his knees in the sand in front of the banana tree, the tears running down his face, wetting his shirt.

"Come on, Pettijohn," Freddie said, ignoring him. "That's the last of them. Seventeen. Not a bad night's work."

Somebody snickered and told Aberdeen to take his girlfriend inside. Nicholas scarcely heard them. He couldn't get the vision of the bat out of his mind. He got to his feet clumsily and stumbled through the living room to the veranda. The clank of the shovel on the walk was still reverberating inside his head.

Nicholas pressed his forehead against the veranda screen, feeling the little squares cut into his skin. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to blot

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out the scene at the banana tree: the bat, the twin pushing his feral face into his father's. *Let me kill it, Dad.*

How would we know if you're any good?

Nicholas wanted to howl, to pour his soul out under the moon. Then the golf ball struck the baseboard near his feet and bounced against his ankle.

Nicholas Romero lay in the bamboo chair on the dark veranda, sipping gin. The bottle was on the floor beside him. A contentment had settled over him, deeper than he had ever known.

Next to him Aberdeen's body lay crumpled in the other chair, his hair dark with blood. Even so, he seemed companionable, even understanding, in the dark and the silence. For there was silence now. The roar of the guns was long over. The others had departed with the bodies of the slain. The banana tree was motionless in the moonlight. The servants were abed.

The moon was almost down. The shaft of the putter caught the last of it and glinted like a rapier where Nicholas had dropped it.

The gin was warm in Nicholas's mouth. He did not think about what he had done. The pleasure in it was ephemeral, but the sense of rightness continued to soothe him, to satisfy him.

He supposed it was time to go.

He stood and moved around Aberdeen's body with slow but sure steps. He was surprised to find his shirt still wet from his tears and wondered how long he had been sitting there.

He paused responsibly to make certain that the veranda door was latched and went into the living room. There he hesitated.

He thought he should leave a note, something. But when he switched on the light and took the pen in hand and bent over the single sheet of paper on Aberdeen's desk, he could think of nothing. He didn't think he could ever find the exact words to explain to anyone why he had done what he had done. It was already behind him, part of a past to which he felt little or no connection. A little pride, perhaps.

He understood that was the way of the doers of deeds. They could not linger over their feats. The armies of the night were out there still, and there was much to be done. So much that it made him tired, just considering it. He needed to rest. A little rest would put him right.

Finally he wrote: Gone to Avalon.

He looked down at the words scrawled on the paper. After a moment, he decided the statement was too pretentious, and anyway there was no one left to whom he wished to write, so he crumpled up the note and stuffed it into his pocket.

He looked about the room uneasily, as if he had forgotten something. He turned off the overhead fan, closed the blinds, hesitated at the light switch, but decided to leave the light on. Aberdeen hadn't liked to sit alone in the dark. Then Nicholas let himself out into what was left of the night. ●

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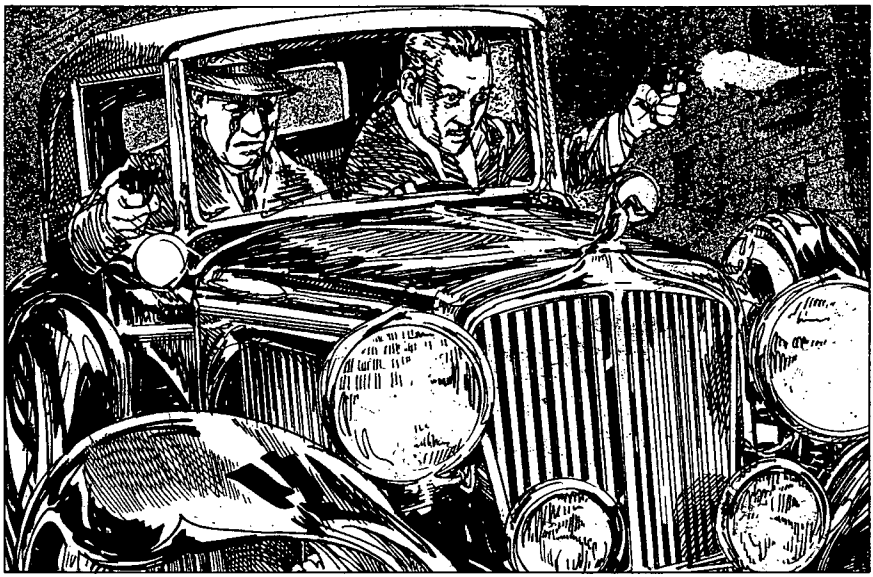

Art by Allen Davis

KADDISH FOR THE KID

by Max Allan Collins

The first operative I ever took on in the A-1 Detective Agency was Stanley Gross. I hadn't been in business for even a year—it was summer of '33—and was in no shape to be adding help. But the thing was—Stanley had a car.

Stanley had a '28 Ford coupe, to be exact, and a yen to be a detective. I had a paying assignment, requiring wheels, and a yen to make a living.

So it was that at three o'clock in the morning, on that unseasonably cool summer evening, I was sitting in the front seat of Stanley's Ford, in front of Goldblatt's department store on West Chicago Avenue, sipping coffee out of a paper cup, waiting to see if anybody came along with a brick or a gun.

I'd been hired two weeks before by the manager of the downtown Goldblatt's on State, just two blocks from my office at Van Buren and Plymouth. Goldblatt's was sort of a working-class Marshall Field's, with six department stores scattered around the Chicago area in various white ethnic neighborhoods.

The stores were good-size—two floors taking up as much as half a block—and the display windows were impressive enough; but once you

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got inside, it was like the push-carts of Maxwell Street had been emptied and organized.

I bought my socks and underwear at the downtown Goldblatt's, but that wasn't how Nathan Heller—me—got hired. I knew Katie Mulhaney, the manager's secretary; I'd bumped into her on one of my socks and underwear buying expeditions, and it blossomed into a friendship. A warm friendship.

Anyway, the manager—Herman Cohen—had summoned me to his office, where he filled me in. His desk was cluttered, but he was neat—moon-faced, moustached, bow- (and fit-to-be-) tied.

1930s private eye Nate Heller is the hero of a series of novels Max Allan Collins began in 1983. The series has been well-received by critics and readers alike, bringing its author two Shamus Awards and five additional Shamus Award nominations. Heller has made only a very few appearances in short stories; his *EQMM* debut is based on a real case and required arduous research. ✝

"Maybe you've seen the stories in the papers," he said, in a machine-gun burst of words, "about this reign of terror we've been suffering."

"Sure," I said.

Goldblatt's wasn't alone; every leading department store was getting hit—stench bombs set off, acid sprayed over merchandise, bricks tossed from cars to shatter plate-glass windows.

He thumbed his moustache; frowned. "Have you heard of 'Boss' Rooney? John Rooney?"

"No."

"Well, he's secretary of the Circular Distributors Union. Over the past two years, Mr. Goldblatt has provided Rooney's union with over three thousand dollars of business—primarily to discourage trouble at our stores."

"This union—these are guys that hand out ad fliers?"

"Yes. Yes, and now Rooney has demanded that Mr. Goldblatt order three hundred of our own sales and ad people to join his union—at a rate of twenty-five cents a day."

My late father had been a die-hard union guy, so I knew a little bit about this sort of thing. "Mr. Cohen, none of the unions in town collect daily dues."

"This one does. They've even been outlawed by the AFL, Mr. Heller. Mr. Goldblatt feels Rooney is nothing short of a racketeer."

"It's an extortion scam, all right. What do you want me to do?"

"Our own security staff is stretched to the limit. We're getting *some* support from State's Attorney Courtney and his people. But they can only do so much. So we've taken on a small army of night watchmen, and are fleshing out the team with private detectives. Miss Mulhaney recommended you."

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Katie knew a good dick when she saw one.

"Swell. When do I start?"

"Immediately. Of course, you do have a car?"

Of course, I lied and said I did. I also said I'd like to put one of my "top" operatives on the assignment with me, and that was fine with Cohen, who was in a more-the-merrier mood where beefing up security was concerned.

Stanley Gross was from Douglas Park, my old neighborhood. His parents were bakers two doors down from my father's bookstore on South Homan. Stanley was a good eight years younger than me, so I remembered him mostly as a pestering kid.

But he'd grown into a tall, good-looking young man—a brown-haired, brown-eyed six-footer who'd been a star football and basketball player in high school. Like me, he went to Crane Junior College; unlike me, he finished.

I guess I'd always been sort of a hero to him. About six months before, he'd started dropping by my office to chew the fat. Business was so lousy, a little company—even from a fresh-faced college boy—was welcome.

We'd sit in the deli restaurant below my office and sip coffee and gnaw on bagels and he'd tell me this embarrassing stuff about my being somebody he'd always looked up to.

"Gosh, Nate, when you made the police force, I thought that was just about the keenest thing."

He really did talk that way—gosh, keen. I told you I was desperate for company.

He brushed a thick comma of brown hair away and grinned in a goofy boyish way; it was endearing, and nauseating. "When I was a kid, coming into your pop's bookstore, you pointed me toward those Nick Carters, and Sherlock Holmes books. Gave me the bug. I *had* to be a detective!"

But the kid was too young to get on the force, and his family didn't have the kind of money or connections it took to get a slot on the PD.

"When you quit," he said, "I admired you so. Standing up to corruption—and in *this* town! Imagine."

Imagine. My leaving the force had little to do with my "standing up to corruption"—after all, graft was high on my list of reasons for joining in the first place—but I said nothing, not wanting to shatter the child's dreams.

"If you ever need an op, I'm your man!"

He said this thousands of times in those six months or so. And he actually did get some security work, through a couple of other, larger agencies. But his dream was to be my partner.

Owning that Ford made his dream come temporarily true.

For two weeks, we'd been living the exciting life of the private eye: sitting in the coupe in front of the Goldblatt's store at Ashland and Chicago, waiting for window smashers to show. Or not.

The massive gray-stone department store was like the courthouse of commerce on this endless street of storefronts; the other businesses

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were smaller—resale shops, hardware stores, pawn shops, your occasional Polish deli. During the day, things were popping here. Now, there was just us—me draped across the front seat, Stanley draped across the back—and the glow of neons and a few pools of light on the sidewalks from streetlamps.

"You know," Stanley said, "this isn't as exciting as I pictured."

"Just a week ago you were all excited about 'packing a rod.' "

"You're making fun of me."

"That's right." I finished my coffee, crumpled the cup, tossed it on the floor.

"I guess a gun is nothing to feel good about."

"Right again."

I was stretched out with my shoulders against the rider's door; in back, he was stretched out just the opposite. This enabled us to maintain eye contact. Not that I wanted to, particularly.

"Nate . . . if you hear me snoring, wake me up."

"You tired, kid?"

"Yeah. Ate too much. Today . . . well, today was my birthday."

"No kidding! Well, Happy Birthday, kid."

"My pa made the keenest cake. Say, I . . . I'm sorry I didn't invite you or anything."

"That's okay."

"It was a surprise party. Just my family—a few friends I went to high school and college with."

"It's okay."

"But there's cake left. You want to stop by Pa's store tomorrow and have a slice with me?"

"We'll see, kid."

"You remember my pa's pastries. Can't beat 'em."

I grinned. "Best on the West Side. You talked me into it. Go ahead and catch a few winks. Nothing's happening."

And nothing was. The street was an empty ribbon of concrete. But about five minutes later, a car came barreling down that concrete ribbon, right down the middle; I sat up.

"What is it, Nate?"

"A drunk, I think. He's weaving a little . . ."

It was a maroon Plymouth coupe; and it was headed right our way.

"Christ!" I said, and dug under my arm for the nine millimeter.

The driver was leaning out the window of the coupe, but whether man or woman I couldn't tell—the headlights of the car, still a good thirty feet away, were blinding.

The night exploded and so did our windshield.

Glass rained on me as I hit the floor; I could hear the roar of the Plymouth's engine and came back up, gun in hand, saw the maroon coupe bearing down on us, saw a silver swan on the radiator cap, and cream-colored wheels, but people in the car going by were a blur, and as I tried to get a better look, orange fire burst from a gun and I ducked down,

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hitting the glass-littered floor. Another four shots riddled the car and the night, the side windows cracking, and behind us the plate glass of display windows was fragmenting, falling to the pavement like sheets of ice.

Then the Plymouth was gone.

So was Stanley.

The first bullet must have got him. He must have sat up to get a look at the oncoming car and took the slug head-on; it threw him back, and now he still seemed to be lounging there, against the now-spiderwebbed window, precious "rod" tucked under his arm; his brown eyes were open, his mouth too, and his expression was almost—not quite—surprised.

I don't think he had time to be truly surprised before he died.

There'd been only time enough for him to take the bullet in the head, the dime-sized entry wound parting the comma of brown hair, streaking the birthday boy's boyish face with blood.

Within an hour I was being questioned by Sergeant Charles Pribyl, who was attached to the state's attorney's office. Pribyl was a decent enough guy, even if he did work under Captain Daniel "Tubbo" Gilbert, who was probably the crookedest cop in town. Which in this town was saying something.

Pribyl had a good reputation, however; and I'd encountered him, from time to time, back when I was working the pickpocket detail. He had soft, gentle features and dark alert eyes.

Normally, he was an almost dapper dresser, but his tie seemed hastily knotted, his suit and hat looked as if he'd thrown them on—which he probably had; he was responding to a call at four in the morning, after all.

He was looking in at Stanley, who hadn't been moved; we were waiting for a coroner's physician to show. Several other plainclothes officers and half a dozen uniformed cops were milling around, footsteps crunching on the glass-strewn sidewalk.

"Just a kid," Pribyl said, stepping away from the Ford. "Just a damn kid." He shook his head. He nodded to me and I followed him over by a shattered display window.

He cocked his head. "How'd you happen to have such a young operative working with you?"

I explained about the car being Stanley's.

He had an expression you only see on cops: sad and yet detached. His eyes tightened.

"How—and why—did stink bombs and window smashing escalate into bloody murder?"

"You expect me to answer that, Sergeant?"

"No. I expect you to tell me what happened. And, Heller—I don't go into this with any preconceived notions about you. Some people on the force—even some good ones, like John Stege—hold it against you, the Lang and Miller business."

They were two crooked cops I'd recently testified against.

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"Not me," he said firmly. "Apples don't come rottener than those two bastards. I just want you to know what kind of footing we're on."

"I appreciate that."

I filled him in, including a description of the murder vehicle, but couldn't describe the people within at all. I wasn't even sure how many of them there were.

"You get the license number?"

"No, dammit."

"Why not? You saw the car well enough."

"Them shooting at me interfered."

He nodded. "Fair enough. Shit. Too bad you didn't get a look at 'em."

"Too bad. But you know who to go calling on."

"How's that?"

I thrust a finger toward the car. "That's Boss Rooney's work—maybe not personally, but he had it done. You know about the Circular Union and the hassles they been giving Goldblatt's, right?"

Pribyl nodded, somewhat reluctantly; he liked me well enough, but I was a private detective. He didn't like having me in the middle of police business.

"Heller, we've been keeping the union headquarters under surveillance for six weeks now. I saw Rooney there today, myself, from the apartment across the way we rented."

"So did anyone leave the union hall tonight? Before the shooting, say around three?"

He shook his head glumly. "We've only been maintaining our watch during department-store business hours. The problem of night attacks is where hired hands like you come in."

"Okay." I sighed. "I won't blame you if you don't blame me."

"Deal."

"So what's next?"

"You can go on home." He glanced toward the Ford. "We'll take care of this."

"You want me to tell the family?"

"Were you close to them?"

"Not really. They're from my old neighborhood, is all."

"I'll handle it."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." He patted my shoulder. "Go home."

I started to go, then turned back. "When are you going to pick up Rooney?"

"I'll have to talk to the state's attorney first. But my guess? Tomorrow. We'll raid the union hall tomorrow."

"Mind if I come along?"

"Wouldn't be appropriate, Heller."

"The kid worked for me. He got killed working for me."

"No. We'll handle it. Go home! Get some sleep."

"I'll go home," I said.

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A chill breeze was whispering.

"But the sleep part," I said, "that I can't promise you."

The next afternoon I was having a beer in a booth in the bar next to the deli below my office. Formerly a blind pig—a speakeasy that looked shuttered from the street (even now, you entered through the deli)—it was a business investment of fighter Barney Ross, as was reflected by the framed boxing photos decorating the dark, smoky little joint.

I grew up with Barney on the West Side. Since my family hadn't practiced Judaism in several generations, I was shabbas goy for Barney's very Orthodox folks, a kid doing chores and errands for them from Friday sundown through Saturday.

But we didn't become really good friends, Barney and me, till we worked Maxwell Street as pullers—teenage street barkers who literally pulled customers into stores for bargains they had no interest in.

Barney, a roughneck made good, was a real Chicago success story. He owned this entire building, and my office—which, with its Murphy bed, was also my residence—was space he traded me for keeping an eye on the place. I was his night watchman, unless a paying job like Goldblatt's came along to take precedence.

The lightweight champion of the world was having a beer, too, in that back booth; he wore a cheerful blue and white sportshirt and a dour expression.

"I'm sorry about your young pal," Barney said.

"He wasn't a 'pal,' really. Just an acquaintance."

"I don't know that Douglas Park crowd myself. But to think of a kid, on his twenty-first birthday . . ." His mildly battered bulldog countenance looked woeful. "He have a girl?"

"Yeah."

"What's her name?"

"I don't remember."

"Poor little bastard. When's the funeral?"

"I don't know."

"You're going, aren't you?"

"No. I don't really know the family that well. I'm sending flowers."

He looked at me with as long a face as a round-faced guy could muster. "You oughta go. He was working for you when he got it."

"I'd be intruding. I'd be out of place."

"You should do kaddish for the kid, Nate."

A mourner's prayer.

"Jesus Christ, Barney, I'm no Jew. I haven't been in a synagogue more than half a dozen times in my life, and then it was social occasions."

"Maybe you don't consider yourself a Jew, with that Irish mug of yours your ma bequeathed you . . . but you're gonna have a rude awakening one of these days, boyo."

"What do you mean?"

"There's plenty of people you're just another 'kike' to, believe you me."

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I sipped the beer. "Nudge me when you get to the point."

"You owe this kid kaddish, Nate."

"Hell, doesn't that go on for months? I don't know the lingo. And if you think I'm putting on some stupid beanie and . . ."

There was a tap on my shoulder. Buddy Gold, the bartender, an ex-pug, leaned in to say, "You got a call."

I went behind the bar to use the phone. It was Sergeant Lou Sapperstein at Central Headquarters in the Loop; Lou had been my boss on the pickpocket detail. I'd called him this morning with a request.

"Tubbo's coppers made their raid this morning, around nine," Lou said. Sapperstein was a hard-nosed, balding cop of about forty-five and one of the few friends I had left on the PD.

"And?"

"And the union hall was empty, 'cept for a bartender. Pribyl and his partner Bert Gray took a whole squad up there, but Rooney and his boys had flew the coop."

"Shit. Somebody tipped them."

"Are you surprised?"

"Yeah. Surprised I expected the cops to play it straight for a change. You wouldn't have the address of that union, by any chance?"

"No, but I can get it. Hold a second."

A sweet union scam like the Circular Distributors had "Outfit" written all over it—and Captain Tubbo Gilbert, head of the State Prosecutor's Police, was known as the richest cop in Chicago. Tubbo was a bagman and police fixer so deep in Frank Nitti's pocket he had Nitti's lint up his nose.

Lou was back: "It's at 7 North Racine. That's Madison and Racine."

"Well, hell—that's spitting distance from Skid Row."

"Yeah. So?"

"So that explains the scam—that 'union' takes hobos and makes day laborers out of them. No wonder they charge daily dues. It's just bums handing out ad circulars. . . ."

"I'd say that's a good guess, Nate."

I thanked Lou and went back to the booth, where Barney was brooding about what a louse his friend Heller was.

"I got something to do," I told him.

"What?"

"My kind of kaddish."

Less than two miles from the prominent department stores of the Loop they'd been fleecing, the Circular Distributors Union had their headquarters on the doorstep of Skid Row and various Hoovervilles. This Madison Street area, just north of Greek town, was a seedy mix of flophouses, marginal apartment buildings, and storefront businesses, mostly bars. Union headquarters was on the second floor of a two-story brick building whose bottom floor was a plumbing supply outlet.

I went up the squeaking stairs and into the union hall, a big high-

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ceilinged open room with a few glassed-in offices toward the front, to the left and right. Ceiling fans whirred lazily, stirring stale smoky air; folding chairs and card tables were scattered everywhere on the scuffed wooden floor, and seated at some were unshaven, tattered "members" of the union. Across the far end stretched a bar, behind which a burly blond guy in rolled-up white shirt-sleeves was polishing a glass. More hobos leaned against the bar, having beers.

I ordered a mug from the bartender, who had a massive skull and tiny dark eyes and a sullen kiss of a mouth.

I salted the brew as I tossed him a nickel. "Hear you had a raid here this morning."

He ignored the question. "This hall's for union members only."

"Jeez, it looks like a saloon."

"Well, it's a union hall. Drink up and move along."

"There's a fin in it for you, if you answer a few questions."

He thought that over; leaned in. "Are you a cop?"

"No. Private."

"Who hired you?"

"Goldblatt's."

He thought some more. The tiny eyes narrowed. "Let's hear the questions."

"What do you know about the Gross kid's murder?"

"Not a damn thing."

"Was Rooney here last night?"

"Far as I know, he was home in bed asleep."

"Know where he lives?"

"No."

"You don't know where your boss lives."

"No. All I know is he's a swell guy. He don't have nothin' to do with these department-store shakedowns the cops are tryin' to pin on him. It's union-busting, is what it is."

"Union-busting." I had a look around at the bleary-eyed clientele in their patched clothes. "You have to be a union, first, 'fore you can get busted up."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means this is a scam. Rooney pulls in winos, gets 'em day-labor jobs for $3.25 a day, then they come up here to pay their daily dues of a quarter, and blow the rest on beer or booze. In other words, first the bums pass out ad fliers, then they come here and just plain pass out."

"I think you better scram. Otherwise I'm gonna have to throw you down the stairs."

I finished the beer. "I'm leaving. But you know what? I'm not gonna give you that fin. I'm afraid you'd just drink it up."

I could feel his eyes on my back as I left, but I'd have heard him if he came out from around the bar. I was starting down the stairs when the door below opened and Sergeant Pribyl, looking irritated, came up to meet me on the landing, halfway. He looked more his usual dapper

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self, but his eyes were black-bagged.

"What's the idea, Heller?"

"I just wanted to come bask in the reflected glory of your triumphant raid this morning."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means when Tubbo's boys are on the case, the Outfit gets advance notice."

He winced. "That's not the way it was. I don't know why Rooney and Berry and the others blew. But nobody in our office warned 'em off."

"Are you sure?"

He clearly wasn't. "Look, I can't have you messing in this. We're on the damn case, okay? We're maintaining surveillance from across the way . . . that's how we spotted you."

"Peachy. Twenty-four-hour surveillance, now?"

"No." He seemed embarrassed. "Just day shift."

"You want some help?"

"What do you mean?"

"Loan me the key to your stakeout crib. I'll keep night watch. Got a phone in there?"

"Yeah."

"I'll call you if Rooney shows. You got pictures of him and the others you can give me?"

"Well . . ."

"What's the harm? Or would Tubbo lower the boom on you if you really did your job?"

He sighed. Scratched his head and came to a decision. "This is unofficial, okay? But there's a possibility the door to that apartment's gonna be left unlocked tonight."

"Do tell."

"Third floor—three-oh-one." He raised a cautionary finger. "We'll try this for one night . . . no showboating, okay? Call me if one of 'em shows."

"Sure. You tried their homes?"

He nodded. "Nothing. Rooney lives on North Ridgeland in Oak Park. Four kids. Wife's a pleasant, matronly type."

"Fat, you mean."

"She hasn't seen Rooney for several weeks. She says he's away from home a lot."

"Keeping a guard posted there?"

"Yeah. And that *is* twenty-four hour." He sighed, shook his head. "Heller, there's a lot about this case that doesn't make sense."

"Such as?"

"That maroon Plymouth. We never saw a car like that in the entire six weeks we had the union hall under surveillance. Rooney drives a blue LaSalle coupe."

"Any maroon Plymouths reported stolen?"

He shook his head. "And it hasn't turned up abandoned, either. They must still have the car."

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"Is Rooney *that* stupid?"

"We can always hope," Pribyl said.

I sat in an easy chair with sprung springs by the window in Room 301 of the residential hotel across from the union hall. It wasn't a flophouse cage, but it wasn't a suite at the Drake, either. Anyway, in the dark it looked fine. I had a flask of rum to keep me company, and the breeze fluttering the sheer, frayed curtains remained unseasonably cool.

Thanks to some photos Pribyl left me, I now knew what Rooney looked like: a good-looking, oval-faced smoothie, in his mid forties, just starting to lose his dark, slicked-back hair; his eyes were hooded, his mouth soft, sensual, sullen. There were also photos of the union's so-called business agent Henry Berry, a mousy little guy with glasses, and pockmarked, cold-eyed Herbert Arnold, V.P. of the union.

But none of them stopped by the union hall—only a steady stream of winos and bums went in and out.

Then, around seven, I spotted somebody who didn't fit the profile.

It was a guy I knew—a fellow private op, Eddie McGowan, a Pinkerton man, in uniform, meaning he was on night-watchman duty. A number of the merchants along Madison must have pitched in for his services.

I left the stakeout and waited down on the street, in front of the plumbing-supply store, for Eddie to come back out. It didn't take long—maybe ten minutes.

"Heller!" he said. He was a skinny, tow-haired guy in his late twenties with a bad complexion and a good outlook. "What no good are you up to?"

"The Goldblatt's shooting. That kid they killed was working with me."

"Oh! I didn't know! Heard about the shooting, of course, but didn't read the papers or anything. So you were involved in that? No kidding."

"No kidding. You on watchman duty?"

"Yeah. Up and down the street here, all night."

"Including the union hall?"

"Sure." He grinned. "I usually stop up for a free drink 'bout this time of night."

"Can you knock off for a couple of minutes? For another free drink?"

"Sure!"

Soon we were in a smoky booth in back of a bar and Eddie was having a boilermaker on me.

"See anything unusual last night," I asked, "around the union hall?"

"Well . . . I had a drink there, around two o'clock in the morning. *That* was a first."

"A drink? Don't they close earlier than that?"

"Yeah. Around eleven. That's all the longer it takes for their 'members' to lap up their daily dough."

"So what were you doing up there at two?"

He shrugged. "Well, I noticed the lights was on upstairs, so I unlocked the street-level door and went up. Figured Alex . . . that's the

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bartender, Alex Davidson . . . might have forgot to turn out the lights 'fore he left. The door up there was locked, but then Mr. Rooney opened it up and told me to come on in."

"Why would he do that?"

"He was feelin' pretty good. Looked like he was workin' on a bender. Anyway, he insists I have a drink with him. I says, sure. Turns out Davidson is still there."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding. So Alex serves me a beer. Berry—the union's business agent—he was there, too. He was in his cups also. So was Rooney's wife—she was there, and also feeling giddy."

I thought about Pribyl's description of Mrs. Rooney as a matronly woman with four kids. "His *wife* was there?"

"Yeah, the lucky stiff."

"Lucky?"

"You should see the dame! Good-lookin' tomato with big dark eyes and a nice shape on her."

"About how old?"

"Young. Twenties. It'd take the sting out of a ball and chain, I can tell you that."

"Eddie . . . here's a fin."

"Heller, the beer's enough!"

"The fin is for telling this same story to Sergeant Pribyl of the state's attorney's coppers."

"Oh. Okay."

"But do it tomorrow."

He smirked. "Okay. I got rounds to make, anyway."

So did I.

At around eleven-fifteen, bartender Alex Davidson was leaving the union hall; his back was turned, as he was locking the street-level door, and I put my nine-millimeter in it.

"Hi, Alex," I said. "Don't turn around, unless you prefer being gut-shot."

"If it's a stickup, all I got's a couple bucks. Take 'em and bug off!"

"No such luck. Leave that door unlocked. We're gonna step back inside."

He grunted and opened the door and we stepped inside.

"Now we're going up the stairs," I said, and we did, in the dark, the wooden steps whining under our weight. He was a big man; I'd have had my work cut out for me—if I hadn't had the gun.

We stopped at the landing where earlier I had spoken to Sergeant Pribyl. "Here's fine," I said.

I allowed him to face me in the near-dark.

He sneered. "You're that private dick."

"I'm sure you mean that in the nicest way. Let me tell you a little more about me. See, we're going to get to know each other, Alex."

"Like hell."

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I slapped him with the nine-millimeter.

He wiped blood off his mouth and looked at me with hate, but also with fear. And he made no more smart-ass remarks.

"I'm the private dick whose twenty-one-year-old partner got shot in the head last night."

Now the fear was edging out the hate; he knew he might die in this dark stairwell.

"I know you were here with Rooney and Berry and the broad last night, serving up drinks as late as two in the morning," I said. "Now you're going to tell me the whole story—or you're the one who's getting tossed down the freaking stairs."

He was trembling now; a big hulk of a man trembling with fear. "I didn't have anything to do with the murder. Not a damn thing!"

"Then why cover for Rooney and the rest?"

"You saw what they're capable of!"

"Take it easy, Alex. Just tell the story."

Rooney had come into the office about noon the day of the shooting; he had started drinking and never stopped. Berry and several other union "officers" arrived and angry discussions about being under surveillance by the state's attorney's cops were accompanied by a lot more drinking.

"The other guys left around five, but Rooney and Berry, they just hung around drinking all evening. Around midnight Rooney jotted a phone number on a matchbook and gave it to me to call for him. It was a Berwyn number. A woman answered. I handed him the phone and he said to her, 'Bring one.' "

"One what?" I asked.

"I'm gettin' to that. She showed up around one o'clock—good-looking dame with black hair and eyes so dark they coulda been black, too."

"Who was she?"

"I don't know. Never saw her before. She took a gun out of her purse and gave it to Rooney."

"That was what he asked her to bring."

"I guess. It was a thirty-eight revolver, a Colt, I think. Anyway, Rooney and Berry were both pretty drunk; I don't know what *her* excuse was. So Rooney takes the gun and says, 'We got a job to pull at Goldblatt's. We're gonna throw some slugs at the windows and watchmen.' "

"How did the girl react?"

He swallowed. "She laughed. She said, 'I'll go along and watch the fun.' Then they all went out."

Jesus.

Finally I said, "What did you do?"

"They told me to wait for 'em. Keep the bar open. They came back in, laughing like hyenas. Rooney says to me, 'You want to see the way he keeled over?' And I says, 'Who?' And he says, 'The guard at Goldblatt's.' Berry laughs and says, 'We really let him have it.' "

"That kid was twenty-one, Alex. It was his goddamn birthday."

The bartender was looking down. "They laughed and joked about it

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till Berry passed out. About six in the morning, Rooney has me pile Berry in a cab. Rooney and the twist slept in his office for maybe an hour. Then they came out, looking sober and kind of . . . scared. He warned me not to tell anybody what I seen, unless I wanted to trade my job for a morgue slab."

"Colorful. Tell me, Alex. You got that girl's phone number in Berwyn?"

"I think it's upstairs. You can put that gun away. I'll help you."

It was dark, but I could see his face well enough; the big man's eyes looked damp. The fear was gone. Something else was in its place. Shame? Something.

We went upstairs, he unlocked the union hall and, under the bar, found the matchbook with the number written inside: Berwyn 2981.

"You want a drink before you go?" he asked.

"You know," I said, "I think I'll pass."

I went back to my office to use the reverse-listing phone book that told me Berwyn 2981 was Rosalie Rizzo's number; and that Rosalie Rizzo lived at 6348 West 13th Street in Berwyn.

First thing the next morning, I borrowed Barney's Hupmobile and drove out to Berwyn, the clean, tidy hunky suburb populated in part by the late Mayor Cermak's patronage people. But finding a Rosalie Rizzo in this largely Czech and Bohemian area came as no surprise: Capone's Cicero was a stone's throw away.

The woman's address was a three-story brick apartment building, but none of the mailboxes in the vestibule bore her name. I found the janitor and gave him Rosalie Rizzo's description. It sounded like Mrs. Riggs to him.

"She's a doll," the janitor said. He was heavy-set and needed a shave; he licked his thick lips as he thought about her. "Ain't seen her since yesterday noon."

That was about nine hours after Stanley was killed.

He continued: "Her and her husband was going to the country, she said. Didn't expect to be back for a couple of weeks."

Her husband.

"What'll a look around their apartment cost me?"

He licked his lips again. "Two bucks?"

Two bucks it was; the janitor used his passkey and left me to it. The well-appointed little apartment included a canary that sang in its gilded cage, a framed photo of slick Boss Rooney on an end table, and a closet containing two sawed-off shotguns and a repeating rifle.

I had barely started to poke around when I had company: a slender, gray-haired woman in a flowered print dress.

"Oh!" she said, coming in the door she'd unlocked.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Who are you?" Her voice had the lilt of an Italian accent.

Under the circumstances, the truth seemed prudent. "A private detective."

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"My daughter is not here! She and her-a husband, they go to vacation. Up north some-a-where. I just-a come to feed the canary!"

"Please don't be frightened. Do you know where she's gone, exactly?"

"No. But . . . maybe my husband do. He is-a downstairs. . . ."

She went to a window, threw it open, and yelled something frantically down in Italian.

I eased her aside in time to see a heavy-set man jump into a maroon Plymouth with a silver swan on the radiator cap, and cream-colored wheels, and squeal away.

And when I turned, the slight gray-haired woman was just as gone. Only she hadn't squealed.

The difference, this time, was a license number for the maroon coupe; I'd seen it: 519-836. In a diner I made a call to Lou Sapperstein, who made a call to the motor vehicle bureau, and phoned back with the scoop: The Plymouth was licensed to Rosalie Rizzo, but the address was different—2848 South Cuyler Avenue, in Berwyn.

The bungalow was typical for Berwyn—a tidy little frame house on a small, perfect lawn. My guess was this was her folks' place. In back was a small matching, but unattached, garage, on the alley. Peeking in the garage windows, I saw the maroon coupe and smiled.

"Is Rosalie in trouble again?"

The voice was female, sweet, young.

I turned and saw a slender, almost beautiful teenage girl with dark eyes and bouncy, dark, shoulder-length hair. She wore a navy-blue sailorish playsuit. Her pretty white legs were bare.

"Are you Rosalie's sister?"

"Yes. Is she in trouble?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I just know Rosalie, that's all. That man isn't really her husband, is he? That Mr. Riggs."

"No."

"Are you here about her accident?"

"No. Where is she?"

"Are you a police officer?"

"I'm a detective. Where did she go?"

"Papa's inside. He's afraid he's going to be in trouble."

"Why's that?"

"Rosalie put her car in our garage yesterday. She said she was in an accident and it was damaged and not to use it. She's going to have it repaired when she gets back from vacation."

"What does that have to do with your papa being scared?"

"Rosalie's going to be mad as h at him, that he used her car." She shrugged. "He said he looked at it and it didn't look damaged to him, and if Mama was going to have to look after Rosalie's g.d. canary, well, he'd sure as h use *her* gas not his."

"I can see his point. Where did your sister go on vacation?"

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"She didn't say. Up north someplace. Someplace she and Mr. Riggs like to go to, to . . . you know. To get away?"

I called Sergeant Pribyl from a gas station where I was getting Barney's Hupmobile tank refilled. I suggested he have another talk with bartender Alex Davidson, gave him the address of "Mr. and Mrs. Riggs," and told him where he could find the maroon Plymouth.

He was grateful but a little miffed about all I had done on my own.

"So much for not showboating," he said, almost huffily. "You've found everything but the damn suspects."

"They've gone up north somewhere," I said.

"Where up north?"

"They don't seem to've told anybody. Look, I have a piece of evidence you may need."

"What?"

"When you talk to Davidson, he'll tell you about a matchbook Rooney wrote the girl's number on. I got the matchbook."

It was still in my pocket. I took it out, idly, and shut the girl's number away, revealing the picture on the matchbook cover: a blue moon hovered surrealistically over a white lake on which two blue lovers paddled in a blue canoe—Eagle River Lodge, Wisconsin.

"I suppose we'll need that," Pribyl's voice over the phone said, "when the time comes."

"I suppose," I said, and hung up.

Eagle River was a town of 1,386 (so said the sign) just inside the Vilas County line at the junction of US 45 and Wisconsin State Highway 70. The country was beyond beautiful, green pines towering higher than Chicago skyscrapers, glittering blue lakes nestling in woodland pockets.

The lodge I was looking for was on Silver Lake, a gas station attendant told me. A beautiful dusk was settling on the woods as I drew into the parking of the large resort sporting a red city-style neon sign saying: DINING AND DANCE. Log-cabin cottages were flung here and there around the periphery like Paul Bunyan's Tinkertoys. Each one was just secluded enough—ideal for couples, married or un-.

Even if Rooney and his dark-haired honey weren't staying here, it was time to find a room: I'd been driving all day. When Barney loaned me his Hupmobile, he'd had no idea the kind of miles I'd put on it. Dead tired, I went to the desk and paid for a cabin.

The guy behind the counter had a plaid shirt on, but he was small and squinty and Hitler-moustached, smoking a stogie, and looked more like a bookie than a lumberjack.

I told him some friends of mine were supposed to be staying here.

"We don't have anybody named Riggs registered."

"How 'bout Mr. and Mrs. Rooney?"

"Them either. How many friends you got, anyway?"

"Why, did I already catch the limit?"

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Before I headed to my cabin, I grabbed some supper in the rustic restaurant. I placed my order with a friendly brunette girl of about nineteen with plenty of personality, and makeup. A road-company Paul Whiteman outfit was playing "Sophisticated Lady" in the adjacent dance hall, and I went over and peeked in, to look for familiar faces. A number of couples were cutting a rug, but not Rooney and Rosalie. Or Henry Berry or Herbert Arnold, either. I went back and had my green salad and fried trout and well-buttered baked potato; I was full and sleepy when I stumbled toward my guest cottage under the light of a moon that bathed the woods ivory.

Walking along the path, I spotted something: snuggled next to one of the secluded cabins was a blue LaSalle coupe with Cook County plates.

Suddenly I wasn't sleepy. I walked briskly back to the lodge check-in desk and batted the bell to summon the stogie-chewing clerk.

"Cabin seven," I said. "I think that blue LaSalle is my friends' car."

His smirk turned his Hitler moustache Chaplinesque. "You want I should break out the champagne?"

"I just want to make sure it's them. Dark-haired doll and an older guy, good-looking, kinda sleepy-eyed, just starting to go bald?"

"That's them." He checked his register. "That's the Ridges." He frowned. "Are they usin' a phony name?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?"

He squinted. "You sure they're friends of yours?"

"Positive. Don't call their room and tell 'em I'm here, though—I want to surprise them. . . ."

I knocked with my left hand; my right was filled with the nine-millimeter. Nothing. I knocked again.

"Who is it?" a male voice said gruffly. "*What* is it?"

"Complimentary fruit basket from the management."

"Go away!"

I kicked the door open.

The lights were off in the little cabin, but enough moonlight came in with me through the doorway to reveal the pair in bed, naked. She was sitting up, her mouth and eyes open in a silent scream, gathering the sheets up protectively over white skin, her dark hair blending with the darkness of the room, making a cameo of her face. He was diving off the bed for the sawed-off shotgun, but I was there to kick it away, wishing I hadn't, wishing I'd let him grab it so I could have had an excuse to put one in his forehead, right where he'd put one in Stanley's.

Boss Rooney wasn't boss of anything now: He was just a naked, balding, forty-four-year-old scam artist, sprawled on the floor. Kicking him would have been easy.

So I did; in the stomach.

He clutched himself and puked. Apparently he'd had the trout, too.

I went over and slammed the door shut, or as shut as it could be, half

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off its hinges. Pointing the gun at her retching, naked boyfriend, I said to the girl, "Turn on the light and put on your clothes."

She nodded and did as she was told. In the glow of a nightstand lamp, I caught glimpses of her white, well-formed body as she stepped into her step-ins; but you know what? She didn't do a thing for me.

"Is Berry here?" I asked Rooney. "Or Arnold?"

"N . . . no," he managed.

"If you're lying," I said, "I'll kill you."

The girl said shrilly, "They aren't here!"

"You can put your clothes on, too," I told Rooney. "If you have another gun hidden somewhere, do me a favor. Make a play for it."

His hooded eyes flared. "Who the hell are you?"

"The private cop you *didn't* kill the other night."

He lowered his gaze. "Oh."

The girl was sitting on the bed, weeping; body heaving.

"Take it easy on her, will you?" he said, zipping his fly. "She's just a kid."

I was opening a window to ease the stench of his vomit.

"Sure," I said. "I'll say kaddish for her."

I handcuffed the lovebirds to the bed and called the local law; they in turn called the state prosecutor's office in Chicago, and Sergeants Pribyl and Gray made the long drive up the next day to pick up the pair.

It seemed the two cops had already caught Henry Berry—a tipster gave them the West Chicago Avenue address of a second-floor room he was holed up in.

I admitted to Pribyl that I'd been wrong about Tubbo tipping off Rooney and the rest about the raid.

"I figure Rooney lammed out of sheer panic," I said, "the morning after the murder."

Pribyl saw it the same way.

The following March, Pribyl arrested Herbert Arnold running a Northside handbill-distributing agency.

Rooney, Berry, and Rosalie Rizzo were all convicted of murder; the two men got life, and the girl twenty years. Arnold hadn't been part of the kill-happy joyride that took Stanley Gross's young life, and got only one to five for conspiracy and extortion.

None of it brought Stanley Gross back, nor did my putting on a beanie and sitting with the Gross family, suffering through a couple of stints at a storefront synagogue on Roosevelt Road.

But it did get Barney off my ass.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: While Nathan Heller is a fictional character, this story is based on a real case—names have not been changed, and the events are fundamentally true; source material included an article by John J. McPhaul and information provided by my research associate, George Hagenauer, whom I thank for his insights and suggestions.

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LAZY MAN

by Richard Forrest

Johnny Calgon was convinced that the human body possessed a finite allotment of heartbeats. This meant that any strenuous work, aerobic exercise, or any activity which speeded up this expenditure was definitely life-shortening. He carried this belief to its logical conclusion and avoided, whenever possible, any project which tended to increase his pulse rate. There was no question in his mind that expending as little energy as possible was definitely life-extending.

Adherence to this philosophy often created areas of disagreement between Johnny and his employers. This resulted in a rather checkered employment career marked by long stretches between positions. A mounting concern over the economic well-being of Johnny's wife and their six children began to seep through the extended family clan.

The Calgons, who often seemed to exclusively populate the small town of Monk's Corner and the surrounding farmland that composed Monk County, were a loyal brood dedicated to benevolent oversight of their numerous relations.

It was Mayor Packard Calgon who finally felt impelled to come up with a solution to Johnny's economic survival. On a balmy May night on the wide front porch of the Calgon Family Restaurant, he broached the possibility to the town fathers as they rocked slowly while recuperating from the "Thursday Night All-You-Can-Eat Chicken Dinner Special."

"When was the last time someone robbed the bank?" he asked reflectively.

Chambers Calgon thought on this for a few minutes and, as was his proper due as elder cousin, fielded the answer. "I think Dillinger

A resident of Charlottesville, Virginia, Richard Forrest is the author of many mystery novels for St. Martin's Press, including the long-running "Lyon Wentworth" series. Mr. Forrest's non-series tale "Lazy Man" is his third published work for *EQMM*. Readers who find the story's dry humor appealing may want to try the latest Wentworth novel, *The Pied Piper of Death*, published by St. Martin's in October of 1997. †

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passed through here in thirty-two. I don't recollect whether he stopped off at the Monk's Corner Bank and Trust Company for a withdrawal or not."

"That's over sixty years ago," Packard mused.

Rockers creaked as the town fathers contemplated the mathematics of that statement. When no dissension was voiced, the mayor continued. "When was the last time we had a killing?"

There was more reflective thought on this question. "Don't quite recall any what you'd actually call murders," Chambers Calgon the elder said.

"Unless you count what Mary Faye did with those garden shears when she caught Bunny Calgon in the hayloft with that Annie girl," Jediah Calgon chuckled.

"Understand they can reattach them nowadays," Bruce Zandt interjected, only to receive several disapproving glances. He blushed at this mild display of chastisement. He knew his presence was still marginally tolerated because he'd only moved into the county when he married Ella Calgon twenty years earlier.

"The way I see it," Packard continued, "we don't have what you'd call real crime in Monk County."

"Which is why we have an eighty-year-old sheriff," Jediah chuckled.

"Ol' Sheriff Barlow Calgon ticketed his own police car this morning," Packard said. "I think it's time he retired."

"You aren't thinking of suggesting what I think you are going to suggest?" Ferdinand Calgon said.

"Yep," Packard said. "We either got to find a job for Johnny or he and his brood go on the county dole. Now, you all know his habits, so we have to find him a position that don't require a whole lot of effort."

"You want to run him for sheriff?"

"Can you think of a better job for a man of his philosophy?" Packard said. There was more thought on Johnny's habits and the matter was settled by the lack of any dissenting voice.

Johnny Calgon ran a combination "front porch-Rose Garden" campaign. This meant that he went nowhere and saw no one but his immediate family. However, since the Calgons had been fruitful and multiplied, combined with the fact that Mayor Packard Calgon controlled all the local patronage, he won the election handily.

It was the second summer after the November election when what would forevermore be known as "the crime" took place. Deputy Jasper Calgon, a summer employee while an accounting student at State University, announced the event in the small sheriff's office located in the basement of the library.

"I'm telling you, Johnny, there's a guy down at Martin's Creek hanging from that big oak tree."

Without removing his feet from the desk, Johnny Calgon held up his hand for quiet until the final scene of his soap opera faded into a com-

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mercial. He turned off the small TV set, whose placement screened the wanted posters, and slowly turned to face Jasper.

"Everyone who grew up in this town has hung from that oak at Martin's Creek. You grab the rope, swing out over the water, and then let go."

"Right now that rope is around this guy's neck."

Johnny mumbled under his breath and was about to heave himself out of the chair when he regained control and stopped stock-still. "Got to watch those sudden moves," he said too softly for his young deputy to hear. He realized how close he had nearly come to bursting into precipitous activity. A man has to be careful and think on the law first. "Is the guy dead?"

"As a tuna fish."

The sheriff wasn't quite sure about the accuracy of the metaphor, but he certainly wasn't going to expend the energy to go upstairs to the library and look it up. "Okay, Jasper, the law says that when a person dies unattended an assistant medical examiner must be called in to pronounce."

"Pronounce what?"

"Him dead. I sometimes wonder about you, Jasper. What do they teach you up at State? Now, Doc Calgon is the assistant M.E. in Monk County, so pry him out of his office and take him out to the creek."

"I think we got a murder on our hands here, Sheriff."

"Sounds like suicide to me."

"He's hanging by his neck."

"Common way to kill yourself."

"And his hands are tied behind his back."

"Probably tied himself a slipknot. It's sorta like kicking the chair over when you hang yourself indoors."

"Kinda hard to tie your own hands behind your back."

Johnny Calgon glared at the young deputy. "If I didn't know better, Jasper, I'd think you were trying to get me to go out there." He slowly sat back in the well-padded swivel chair and contemplated the difficulties of a trip to the large oak tree whose branches hung over the water at Martin's Creek. "As I recall, Jasper, to get there you take County 3021 to the old bridge at Calgon's Ford."

"That's right, sir."

"That's where you have to leave the cruiser and climb down that steep slope. Then you work your way along the riverbank for maybe half a mile or so."

"Over rocks and through brambles and all that woodsy stuff, Sheriff. We better get going."

"Look at your uniform, Jasper. Now, that's all right for the deputy, but you can't have the sheriff covered with brambles, with rips and tears in his clothes. I have a position to uphold. Here's what I want you to do. Go back down there with Doc Calgon. Before you cut the guy down, I want you to take lots of camry pictures with our new Polaroid.

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And you make lots of evidence notes and bring it all back here for me to solve the crime."

"You want me to call the forensic people at the state crime lab?"

"You crazy, Jasper! You know what happens if we do that? Can you imagine the paperwork and the socializing we'd have to do? And let me tell you, Packard Calgon would not be pleased at paying the per diem the state would hit us with. Now go back down there and get me the evidence."

Jasper Calgon's uncertainty caused him to momentarily shift from one foot to the other until he decided that he had received a direct order. He turned to leave. "Yes, sir."

"Wait a minute, Jasper. How come you found the body when you can't drive the cruiser back in there?"

"Skee Calgon found him. He and a couple of his friends cut school today to go swimming. When they saw the body they ran back to the road hollering and yelling. I was on routine patrol passing Calgon's Ford when I found them blubbering by the side of the road. After I calmed them down a bit and heard what they saw, I went down to take a look myself."

"Funny place to kill a man," Johnny mumbled aloud as Jasper left. He put his feet back on his desk and fingered the TV remote to flip past two make-believe cop shows and one real-life *Most Wanted* episode. He hated to watch law-enforcement officers engaged in such frantic activity. "Hell of a hard job to carry a victim through those woods and then hoist him up on a rope. Took a lot of exertion. A real lot," he said in completion of the thought.

It was ten minutes later when the radio in the far corner of the room crackled. "Hello, base, this is car thirty-two. Come in, please."

Naturally Johnny Calgon ignored the call. He knew who it was and what the deputy wanted.

The radio kept making noise until the desperation in Jasper's voice was interfering with the TV program. "Please come in, Johnny," was the desperate plea.

He sighed and pushed against the desk legs so that the swivel chair rolled backwards across the room until it gently bumped into the table that held the radio and unused computer. He slowly turned and threw the talk switch on the microphone. "We don't have a car thirty-two," he said. "In fact we only have one car."

"Sheriff, this is Deputy Calgon and I'm rolling on that three-four-seven to Martin's Creek. I got a question."

"I got one too," Johnny responded. "What in hell is a three-four-seven?"

"It's a . . . You don't want me to say that on the radio, Sheriff. You want me to use land-lines."

"Land-lines? There's no pay phones out where you are. Tell me what in the hell you're talking about so I know why you're bothering me."

"That guy hanging from the oak tree down at Martin's Creek. I'm on

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my way down there now to take the pictures. Doc Calgon is following right behind me. How many pictures you want me to take, Johnny?"

"How much film you got?"

"Six rolls."

"Take them all. Get the body from every possible angle. Climb the tree, wade in the water. Do it right. And from now on observe radio silence. Over and out."

The phone rang before his chair finished rolling back across the room to the desk. He knew who was calling before he snapped the receiver from its cradle. "No, Aunt Martha, we don't know who's dead down there," he said without preamble. "Now get off this phone and go back to your scanner. I expect important police business on this line."

He hung up and was about to sink back in the chair when he noticed that the clock on the wall read four. It was too early to go home, and too late for the afternoon patrol, which he couldn't make Jasper do since the deputy was occupied with that three-four-seven. The only solution was to declare it nap time. He walked into the rear of the building, which contained two small holding cells. He curled up on the second cell's narrow bunk, since he preferred that mattress, and pulled the army blanket up to his chin. With a sigh of contentment he drifted to sleep.

"Sheriff!"

"What!" Johnny Calgon sat bolt upright. An adrenaline rush caused his heart to pound rapidly. He quickly placed his hand over his chest and began to inhale and exhale in a slow rhythm while he glared at the alarmed deputy standing in the cell's entrance. "Don't do that. Don't ever startle me again."

"I just got back, Sheriff. I knew how eager you were to hear the results of my investigation."

"Somehow I would have held my eagerness in check. Did Doc pronounce?"

"Sure did. He took one look and pronounced from the creek bank even before I cut the victim down. He said the deceased was deader'n hell."

"I suspected that to be the case."

"I got my Polaroid shots spread out in the office. The money's in an evidence bag, and the body is at Calgon's Funeral Home."

"What money?"

"The money that was stuffed in the deceased's mouth. I guess that proves he was murdered, right, Sheriff?"

"Maybe he just wanted to take his assets with him when he went," Johnny said as he lurched into the office and frowned at the mass of Polaroid snapshots spread over every available counter surface in the small room.

"You've been a busy little fellow, haven't you, Jasper?"

"Thank you, sir. Just trying to do my duty."

The deputy handed him a clear acetate evidence bag containing a mass of hundred-dollar bills rolled into a fat wad. "These were stuck in

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the guy's mouth. If the hanging didn't kill him he might have choked on the money."

Johnny Calgon hefted the roll of money and glared at it as if to create guilt for the paperwork it was going to cause.

"Doc says he was killed around midnight last night," Jasper continued.

"Uh-huh." Johnny walked around the room looking at the dozens of Polaroid snapshots the deputy had taken. The mere thought of the energy expended on this activity was tiring. There were shots obviously taken from the limb above the hanging body. A group of pictures had been taken from the riverbank, while others were snapped from various angles in the river. There were even two from directly underneath the body.

"You musta got wet taking these?"

Jasper blushed. "Well, there weren't no one around so I went in the water in my underwear."

"Looks like this guy is wearing expensive clothes."

"That's what Doc allowed. He said he could wear fancy duds like that if Packard Calgon hadn't made him come back to Monk's Corner to practice medicine. He said he coulda made big bucks soaking patients in the city."

"Uh-huh, and died young. Those shoes look like they cost a nickel or two."

"Doc said they're Italian and cost three, maybe four hundred."

"No mud on them. No chunks of dirt on the soles or sides. Were the shoes or clothing wet?"

"No. Dry as a bone."

"So the dirt didn't wash off. It's kinda funny he wasn't covered with some mud and a couple of brambles if they dragged him all the way in there."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, we didn't see any evidence of them walking around the oak tree or dragging a body, be it dead or alive."

Calgon nodded. "And it rained early last night. No footprints?"

"Just the ones made by the bare feet of the kids who went in there to go swimming."

Calgon ripped open the evidence bag and riffled through the hundred-dollar bills. "Funny money."

"Yeah, I bet you could have a lot of fun with a wad like that."

"I mean it's counterfeit," Johnny Calgon said.

"How do you know?"

"All the bills have the same serial number."

"You know, Sheriff, I don't figure this at all. This is a big-time killing, right?"

"I suppose." Calgon sank back in his swivel chair and speculated about tonight's supper.

"But why here?" the deputy went on eagerly. "Monk County isn't even on the thruway. So why did they bring a body all the way in here? They

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had to lug it out to Martin's Creek, and then carry it all the way upstream to the oak tree and hang it in the middle of nowhere."

"They didn't know the oak was a swimming hole," Calgon said. If he was in luck, dinner tonight might be country-fried steak.

"That figures. They thought the body wouldn't be found for days weeks, or maybe even months."

Calgon shook his head. He wouldn't be unhappy if the wife served liver and bacon tonight. He surely was working up an appetite with all this mental work. "Nope. They didn't care if it was found after two or three days."

"What?"

"The whole thing probably started in the city with a drug buy that went bad. Expensive clothes on the deceased means he's a wholesaler It was a big buy, and the hanging guy tried to pay for it with funny money. That pissed the sellers off and they were taking their former customer on a one-way trip somewhere to kill him and dump the body when something happened on the thruway. They got off the highway at exit ninety-one in Warren. That put them on the old county road that crosses into Monk County at Martin's Creek. They were probably having car trouble and were looking for a garage. They couldn't expose the deceased to outsiders so they went ahead and did the deed and stuffed the money in his mouth."

"But why go so far back in the woods?"

"Didn't come in that way. They came downstream in a boat. That's why there's no footprints and why the deceased's shoes are so neat They stopped at Martin's fish camp a mile upstream. They rented a cabin and skiff and brought the victim downstream. After they hung him they went back to the camp to wait while their car was being fixed."

"How do you know all that?"

"From the evidence. Now call Calgon's Garage and see if they're fixing a big expensive car of some sort. It's probably a Caddie or something like that."

"I can see why you're sheriff," Jasper Calgon said in awe. "What detection." He picked up the phone and dialed. "If our suspects are up there we'll go in like a raid with a SWAT team, wearing body armor and carrying automatic weapons. The whole works, right?"

Johnny Calgon scowled. "Jasper, don't they teach you anything up there at the university? A raid like you're talking means that first of all we got to open the armory and get our heavy weapons."

"Where is our armory, Sheriff?"

"In the closet upstairs behind the librarian's desk. The powerful stuff is in next to where the Christmas decorations are kept. We'd have to break out those heavy weapons and lug them through the woods. Next when we began to get close we'd have to hump through the brush and for the final few yards crawl in the dirt. Do you have any idea how hot body armor is? Then after the firefight you really got a mess on your

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hands. You ever clean an automatic weapon? Talk about hard work. Now go call the garage."

"Thanks," Jasper said in conclusion to his phone conversation as he hung up and turned triumphantly to the sheriff. "You were right. Out-of-state car with a busted transmission was towed in from the fish camp. The owner and two other guys are waiting there until the garage fixes and returns it."

"Is it ready?"

"In an hour."

"This pace is going to be the death of me," Johnny Calgon said as he heaved himself from the chair. "You get me a big cardboard box and put the rope the deceased was hanging from inside it."

"You're going to confront them with the evidence, right, Sheriff?"

"Not exactly."

Thadeus Martin, owner and operator of the fish camp on Martin's Creek, was not exactly a Calgon. His wife was a Calgon cousin on both parental sides so that did qualify him for the periphery of the extended clan. He would have gladly traded away that heritage if it would make the automatic pistol pressed against his forehead disappear.

The fish camp's phone rang again.

"When you answer it, you better keep it smooth," the man in the double-breasted suit with the gravel voice said. "Unless you want ventilation in your forehead, keep it cool."

"I understand," Thadeus was finally able to mutter.

He gingerly picked up the receiver. "Yes."

"You know who this is?" Johnny Calgon said.

"Yep, sure do."

"I know you got trouble with some out-of-towners there who don't know much about fishing. So, I'm bringing their car around."

"Everything's just fine here, Johnny. Glad it's ready."

He hung up and tried to step away from the man with the pistol but was held firmly in place by the grip on his shirt. "That was the garage. Your car is ready and they're driving it down here."

"That's just dandy, fisherman."

"I suppose you'll be wanting a late checkout time?"

The three men exchanged quick glances which made Thadeus realize that if there was to be any checking out done around here it was most likely going to be his permanent one. He didn't believe they intended to leave any witnesses.

It was twenty-two minutes later when Johnny Calgon drove the large car up the dirt road leading to the fish camp along Martin's Creek. The car rocked on its springs as he made an abrupt halt in front of the rustic office which squatted in front of the half-dozen cabins. The driver's door opened after he popped the trunk.

Thadeus was shoved out on the porch with the large pistol pressed to

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the rear of his head while a firm grip held the back of his shirt. He and his captor were flanked by the other two men, who gripped weapons inside their jackets.

Johnny manhandled a large cardboard carton from the car trunk and balanced it on his shoulder as he approached the porch. "Afternoon, Thadeus." He nodded at the other three men. "Howdy." He pushed between them and went inside the office, which also doubled as a combination convenience and bait store. He placed the box in the center of the floor directly over his right foot and stood with his arms folded across his chest.

"Sheriff, I think these gentlemen would like to have a few words with you," Thadeus said.

"I expect they would," Johnny replied. "I hope we can make it fast. It's near my dinnertime and the snakes are getting hungry too."

"What snakes?" the man pressing the gun against Thadeus said with a faint trace of alarm.

"The ones I got here in this box," Johnny Calgon said as he kicked the box with his left foot hard enough to move the rope inside around. The three men in the tailored business suits involuntarily stepped back.

"We're going to blow you away, mister," the man with the large .347 Magnum pointed at Thadeus said as he shifted aim.

"You will note that the box is not sealed," Johnny Calgon said in a voice reminiscent of a magician introducing a magic trick by displaying an empty cylinder. "The top and bottom flaps of the box are merely closed not sealed. Now, if you shoot me and I fall backwards the box will be flipped up and over from the movement of my right foot. And, walla, angry snakes slither. If I should fall forward on the box, the weight of my fall will crush open the top lid and once again angry snakes come pouring out. Now, snakes are not carrion eaters, so they will have no interest in me, but they will vent their venom, so to speak, on the others in this room. I'm sorry about that, Thadeus."

"It's okay, Johnny," Thadeus Martin answered. "Sometimes the good get mixed in with the bad."

"You must understand that when the snakes come out of that box they will be angry and will strike at a rush. You can't outrun them, you know. Matter of fact, no way you can get away from them enclosed in a small room like this."

The man on Thadeus's right threw off his jacket to reveal an Uzi machine gun hung from his shoulder. He pulled the weapon into his arms and swept the muzzle back and forth in the general direction of the large cardboard box. "This little baby here will cut those suckers to ribbons."

"When you were a kid did you ever cut a worm in half with your penknife?" Johnny asked reflectively.

"What's that got . . . " A look of horrified understanding slowly marched across the gunman's face.

"Made two worms, right?" Johnny Calgon said to answer his own

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question. "Same with snakes. If you weren't city boys you'd know that. You start blasting away in here and you're going to have a whole room full of snakes. Reminds me of last summer when Dora, that's Thadeus's wife, found a copperhead down by the dock and cut the viper into eight parts with her hoe. You never saw so many mad little snakes. They couldn't rent a boat for a week because of all those pissed-off snakes. Snake bite's a bad way to go."

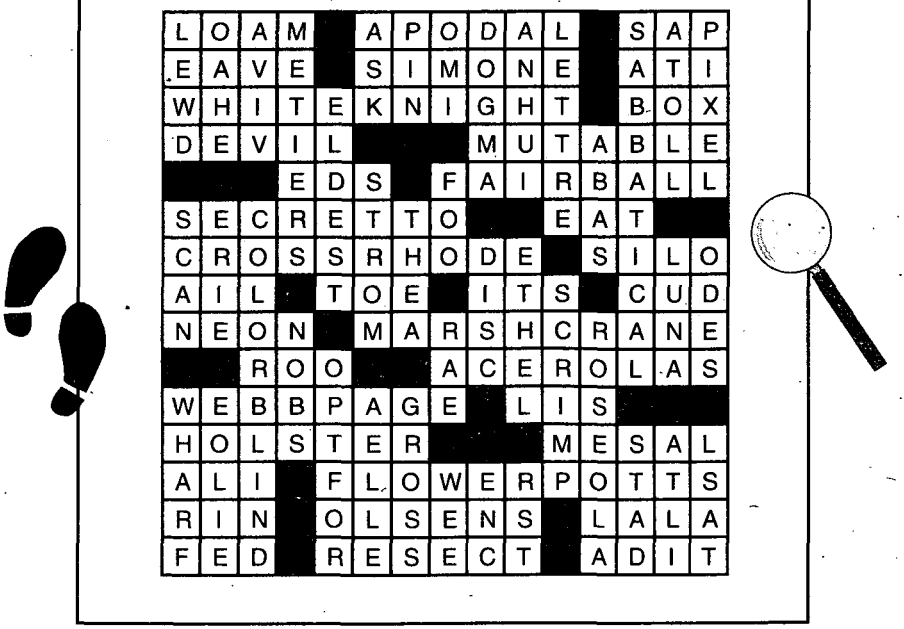
"Real bad," Thadeus agreed. "Worse than a rabid-dog bite."

"So I've heard," Johnny Calgon said as he passed the handcuffs over the box to his three prisoners. "Now, if you boys will oblige me and just slip these over your wrists."

Jasper Calgon pounded the steering wheel of the police cruiser in glee as he drove back County 3021 toward Monk's Corner. The three handcuffed prisoners sat sullenly in the backseat behind the wire mesh. "Hot dog, Uncle Johnny! I'd 'a loved to seen their faces when you opened the box to show the rope inside."

The sheriff sighed. "Don't ever call me Uncle, Jasper. People might think we got nepotism going on around here." ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword


L O A M A P O D A L S A P
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Close Cover Before Striking

by Donald Olson

Many of Donald Olson's stories take place in a world of tenuous social connections, as in this tale of two loners whose self-indulgent schemes meet head-on. What fascinates us is the character pared down to its essential elements. The New York State author's sense of ironic justice is also at play here, making his third *EQMM* story of 1998 a special treat. Fans look ahead: We'll have more from Mr. Olson this autumn.

To score as a country music star in Nashville had been Layne Chase's sole ambition since learning to play the guitar as a teenager. A passable voice, a so-so talent for songwriting, and a string of engagements at bars and county fairs around the tri-state area had kept the dream alive over the years. As for looks, didn't the girls still tell him he was cuter than Garth Brooks?

For every Garth Brooks, however, there must be at least a hundred Layne Chases, and meanwhile he had to make a living. This he did by working off and on for his brother Brian who was a roofing contractor, meaning that Layne spent more time off the roof than on, daydreaming in the shade with his guitar—or *git*-ar as he called it—while brother Brian did most of the work. Brian didn't mind. He was Layne's only family and possibly the only one who'd ever cared about him. Except for Mary Flo, of course, who had married Layne when he was nineteen, borne him two kids, and then taken off, fed up with Layne's casual infidelities and wandering-troubadour lifestyle.

Layne knew he was no more cut out for family life than for shingling roofs, and what money he scraped together went into producing demo tapes which he sent off to agents and radio stations, hoping that sooner or later one of his songs would open the golden—or even platinum—door to the success he craved.

It didn't happen.

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He was in sight of forty when it appeared, however, that his faith and persistence might finally be going to pay off. An agent in Nashville whose name he'd found in a country music magazine expressed enthusiasm for one of his songs and persuaded Layne, who should have known better, to sign a contract giving the agent sole rights to Layne's song "Dead Roses."

Months went by with no further word from this agent until one day while Layne was helping lay a roof in Corydon and listening to a radio station that played bluegrass music, he was astonished to hear his own song being played and sung by a group he'd never heard of. He immediately placed a call to the agent but failed to reach him. Repeated attempts were just as fruitless.

A week later Layne spent his last fifty bucks on a bus ticket to Nashville. There he was informed that the agent had "gone to the Coast" and would no doubt be in touch. "Dead Roses"? Hadn't Layne signed away his rights to the song? Tough luck, buddy, better luck next time. Or words to that effect.

So here was Layne, with no baggage but his guitar and a head full of tarnished dreams, perched on a picnic table at a rest stop on the Interstate between Tennessee and the Pennsylvania border. Being broke, he'd had to thumb rides, and as it was almost sunset he'd resigned himself to sleeping rough until morning. He plucked at his guitar, ignored the hunger pangs in his belly, and harbored murderous thoughts about that slippery agent in Nashville.

Alone at the rest stop, Layne paid little heed to the late-model car that came limping off the Interstate and stopped several yards beyond him. He looked up only when the driver stepped from the car and stood glumly studying the flat rear tire. He was dressed in a business suit and had light wavy hair that looked silvery in the waning light. Presently he removed his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and opened the trunk.

Here might be a chance of escaping a lonely night at the rest stop, thought Layne, and went to offer his help. "No use you gettin' them good duds dirty," he said jovially.

"I don't care about that," replied the man, who was about Layne's age and build but with short-cut streaky blond hair and a seamless, almost boyish face marred only by pouchy wrinkles under the blue eyes. "Truth is, I'm not sure *how* to change a tire. Never had to."

Layne regarded the other man with the sympathetic-disdainful smile of a guy who can fix anything fixable, but made the changing of the tire appear a more arduous task than it was. The man thanked Layne and pulled out his wallet. Layne waved it away.

"Forget it," he said. "Tell you what, though. I'd sure welcome a lift."

The blond man's eyes swept over Layne's hippy-cowboy outfit, his raggedy chestnut mane and unshaven face; he hesitated briefly before

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nodding. "I'm going as far as Starbrick, Pennsylvania, if that'll help you."

"Gets me almost home." Layne wiped his hand on his jeans and stuck it out. "Layne Chase."

"Chesley Swan."

Layne retrieved his guitar and they were soon back on the road heading north. As they drove Layne poured into Swan's ear the woeful saga he never tired of imparting to strangers, making it sound far more romantic and adventurous than it was. And now, of course, there was this latest sad chapter about the fiasco in Nashville.

"No foolin', man, I near fell off the damn roof when I heard *my* song comin' over the radio. This is it, I thought. This is what I been waitin' for all these years. So then I boogie down to Nashville and find out I been screwed."

"Meaning you didn't read the small print," said Swan.

"Hell, I read the whole thing. So'd my brother Brian. It was the way it was worded. Would've taken a Philadelphia lawyer to get the message."

"So what'll you do now?" Swan asked.

"Keep on pluckin', what else? Sure was a blast, though, thinkin' I'd never have to shingle another damn roof in my life. Hey, you got anything to write on?"

"There's a pad and pencil in the glove compartment."

"I was tinkerin' with a new song back there at the rest stop. Starts out like this:

'Papa's in the death house,
Mama's in her grave,
Bubba's in reform school
Learnin' to behave . . .' "

He broke off with a laugh. "Sounds better with a guitar."

Swan said nothing; they rode on in silence as Layne hummed to himself while jotting words on the pad, crossing them out, nibbling on the pen, and finally, with a sigh, sticking the paper in his shirt pocket and gazing out into the swiftly darkening landscape.

Presently, he offered to take over the wheel if Swan was tired of driving. Swan shook his head. "Thanks, but if it's all the same to you I'd like to pull in somewhere for the night. Should be a motel off the next exit."

"Okay by me," said Layne. "I can sleep in the car."

Swan smiled at this. "That won't be necessary."

Layne didn't argue and felt even better after they'd checked into the motel and Swan suggested they walk over to a nearby bar for a nightcap before turning in.

Situated beside a big pond, the place was called the Starboard Inn and was already doing a good business when Swan and Layne walked in, found a table in the corner, and gazed vacantly at the TV above the bar until they were served.

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"Nice place," said Layne, his spirits much improved with the feel of a bottle of beer in his hand.

"I'm not really a bar person," admitted Swan in the pious tone of a heavy drinker who does his tippling in private. "I guess you'd say I've lived a somewhat sheltered life."

Like most self-obsessed people, Layne was rarely curious about the life stories of others, but now he felt obliged by Swan's generosity to fake an interest.

"You live—where was it—in Starbrick?"

Swan emptied his beer into a tall glass and stared into it reflectively. "I did once, when I was a kid. Haven't been back since."

"So why now? Sentimental journey?"

"Financial, not sentimental."

"If you're gonna rob a bank, count me in."

Swan laughed. "Well, not quite that. The bank knows I'm coming. Then all I have to do is sign my name a few times and it's back to Biloxi."

"Back to the wife and kiddies?"

"No wife. No kiddies. No anybody."

"You too?"

"I had a family once. Mother and Father. They were murdered."

Layne jerked his head up, no longer faking an interest. "You serious?"

Swan spoke of the event as if it were no more extraordinary than any other childhood memory. "I was seven at the time. One night somebody came to the house and shot them both dead."

"What was it, a robbery?"

"Nothing was taken. The motive remains a mystery. The case was never solved."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"Upstairs in bed. The first shot woke me up. I found their bodies. The shrinks would say—well, that's what they *did* say, more than one of them—that I blocked out what happened. For years, you know, like kids sometimes do when they've been abused."

After one beer Swan switched to whisky. In the same casual tone he spoke of growing up in various foster homes. Money had evidently been no problem, his parents' lives had been heavily insured. The jobs he'd held had been no more than therapeutic exercises.

Gradually his speech grew slurred. "I guess you'd say I finally found a way to exorcise my demons. I started writing. Not stories or anything like that. Thoughts, really. That's what the book's called. *Ruminations.*"

"The book?"

Swan made a dismissive gesture. His face seemed to expand with drink, the pouches became more pronounced, the blue eyes glazed and distant. "Call it a memoir of a lost life, or whatever. I showed it to one of my therapists. He said it was good enough to publish. He knew someone who knew someone else and much to my surprise it caught the

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attention of a publisher. They gave me a contract. It came out last month. With no fanfare, sad to say."

Layne felt a stirring of envy. My God, the guy had had a book published and made it sound like no big deal. "Hell, man, ain't you excited about it?"

"Not really."

"So that's why you're going back to Starbrick?"

"No. Money's been accruing in a bank account there. About fifty grand, from a sort of trust fund. I'm going to draw it all out, find myself a hideaway, and do nothing but write."

"Lucky you. Man, if I had that kind of money that's what I'd do. Just write songs and play my guitar until I went broke or hit the jackpot."

The bar was crowded now, the air dense with smoke, the blare of the jukebox made it hard to hear without leaning across the table. Layne noticed that Swan's fingers trembled slightly as he lit another cigarette.

"You tellin' me all you gotta do is walk in that bank and they'll fork over fifty grand?"

"Why not? I've got my bank statements, checkbook, credit cards, all the ID I need. No problem."

Layne, who seemed never able to cash a penny-ante check without a hassle, found this downright awesome. "You ain't got *no* family at all there?"

"I wouldn't know a soul in that town. Nobody would know me. I told you, I was only seven when I left."

Layne wondered how much of Swan's story was true. With a few beers under his belt he himself could spin quite a yarn. "I'd like to read your book," he said, hoping to call Swan's bluff.

"You can read yourself to sleep with it. And you can sing me to sleep. 'Papa's in the death house, Mama's in the grave' . . . ? Frankly, Layne, I think that's a nonstarter. Maybe you better stick to shingling roofs."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, man," said Layne with a scowl.

"No offense. I just mean you make this music business sound like a very chancy thing to build your future on."

"So I believe in taking chances. I always have." Layne picked up a matchbook from the table and flipped it open. "See what it says there? 'Close cover before striking.' I never do, and I guess I never will. If that means sooner or later I'm gonna burn my fingers, hell, takin' chances is what it's all about."

Swan staggered slightly as they left the bar and walked back to the motel. He stopped by the car, fumbled with his keys to lift the trunk, and pulled out a briefcase. In the room he opened it and drew out a slim book in a blue and green jacket. Tossing it onto Layne's bed he said, "You might find it a bit over your head. If I say so myself, it is a cut or two above 'Daddy's in the death house.'"

His derisive tone stung Layne. He knew how alcohol could expose the raw side of a personality, which could explain the sudden change from

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a seemingly modest and amiable nature to one of arrogance and mean-spirited conceit. Without a word, Layne sprawled on the bed and began to read.

It was a very short book, no more than a collection of essays. Layne found its lofty sentiments hard to relate to the man who had written them, but then he knew songwriters who wrote the most soulful lyrics while being themselves ill-mannered, rough-tempered, and boorish.

There was no need to praise or condemn the book, for by the time Layne was halfway through it Swan had fallen asleep and lay snoring on the other bed. With no sense of guilt, Layne seized the chance to examine Swan's briefcase. Its contents verified Swan's remarks about the bank statement.

Not unexpectedly, Swan awoke with a massive hangover and was quite willing for Layne to take the wheel when they resumed their trip. It had been understood that Layne would be dropped off at Breezewood, as he would be going north and Swan heading west. Swan catnapped most of the morning, leaving Layne free to explore the dark and dangerous path his mind seemed to be traveling.

He knew that Swan had reserved a room for himself at the Hotel Starbrick, that he would be arriving in his hometown a stranger, as much a stranger as Layne would have been.

Layne thought of all that money just waiting for Swan to pick up, while for himself what was there to look forward to? Another roof to shingle? Another gig at some crummy roadhouse? The consciousness of failure, of dreams turning to rust, of growing old and losing his looks, with no one to share even his disappointments, filled him with bitter despair.

For all that, it cannot be said that Layne would have acted upon that dark, wild impulse that blinded his judgment had not the opportunity so fatefully presented itself.

Rousing himself, Swan made a joking remark about its being time to get rid of some more of last night's poison. He told Layne to pull off the highway and find a secluded spot where he could stop for a minute.

As soon as Swan had disappeared behind the trees bordering a dirt road, Layne slid out of his seat, quietly shut the door, and followed, stopping several feet from where Swan stood facing a creek running through the undergrowth.

Layne stooped and picked up a length of tree limb, which might almost have fallen there for no other purpose. Gripping it tightly in his fist he crept silently upon the unsuspecting Swan.

Like many others of its size in that part of Pennsylvania, Starbrick seemed almost like a Southern town, as if it lay on the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line: sleepy tree-lined streets, faded brick buildings close to the sidewalks, a town still undiscovered by the developers of malls and supermarkets.

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Until now it hadn't occurred to Layne that, this being Saturday, the bank would be closed until nine o'clock Monday morning; he had some forty-eight hours before he could withdraw Swan's money and make his escape.

Wearing Swan's clothes, and with his hair neatly combed, Layne checked into the Hotel Starbrick, a semi-dilapidated relic of small-town Victorian grandeur in the center of town.

He boldly signed Swan's name to the register as the bald and beaming manager regarded him with politely curious interest.

"Pleasure to welcome you, Mr. Swan, and do let me congratulate you, sir." As if having practiced this little speech and gesture, he reached under the counter and produced a newspaper folded to reveal a circled item on the second page. "I shall be sure to have you sign a copy for me."

With a guarded smile Layne scanned the item:

> Mr. Chesley Swan, author of *Ruminations,* a book about his life following the unsolved murder of his parents, Dr. and Mrs. Hector Swan, which took place in Starbrick over a quarter-century ago, will be signing copies of his book at the Book Nook on Main Street Monday afternoon from 1 to 4 P.M.

Layne's throat went dry. Damn Swan! *That's* what he must have meant by saying he'd be signing his name a few times! As if Swan had played a dirty trick on him, betrayed him like the agent in Nashville, Layne paid no heed to the envelope the manager handed him along with his room key, saying, "This came for you yesterday, Mr. Swan." He didn't glance at it until he was in his room. It was addressed to Mr. Chesley Swan, Hotel Starbrick, and marked "Hold for arrival." The brief letter inside was typewritten, with no salutation:

> You suggested we meet at the hotel. I think somewhere less public would be wiser. I'll be waiting for you at the old church at four on Saturday. Nobody ever comes there, but just to be safe, carry this letter where I can see it. Then I'll know it's you.

The letter was signed, "Laura."

Layne reread the words several times, finding them far more disturbing than that newspaper item. No problem there; he would be long gone by the time Swan was expected at the Book Nook. But what to do about this?

His immediate impulse was to slip out of the hotel, jump into Swan's car and ditch it somewhere out of town, try to forget this whole experience as if it were no more than one of those bad trips he'd known in his earlier pill-popping days when he thought all musicians had to be potheads.

But then he thought about the money. All that money. To chicken out now would be like tearing up a winning lottery ticket. What risk could there be in meeting this woman? Whoever she was, she evidently

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wouldn't know Swan by sight; why else ask him to bring along her letter as a means of identification? Nor could she be an old flame; Swan was only seven when he left Starbrick. But could Swan have lied about never having revisited the town?

Was the chance worth taking for a prize of fifty grand? Why not?

For the next hour Layne practiced forging Swan's signature, using papers he found in Swan's briefcase. Then, tucking the mysterious letter in his pocket, he went downstairs.

"You wouldn't remember, of course," said the hotel manager when Layne asked him for directions to the old church. "They built a new Holy Cross in town after the old church burned down ten or twelve years ago. Not more than a shell now. It'll be the churchyard you want to visit, of course. How long's it been, close to thirty years, since your folks were laid to rest there?"

"About that, yes."

The ruined church loomed darkly among the trees, a small gothic edifice, black with age and the sooty residue of the fire that had consumed all but its stone shell and a few rafters. A broken flight of stone steps led up to it from the dusty country road, the churchyard visible just beyond.

Holding the letter in his hand, Layne climbed the steps and paused just inside the arched doorway. A light rain fell through the skeletal rafters overhead. Only the dismal murmur of mourning doves in the empty belfry disturbed the silence.

She stood where the chancel had been, a tall slim woman with dark blond hair and a face which must once have been beautiful before the years had dulled and coarsened it. She held a blue umbrella over her head and wore an old trenchcoat.

"Funny," she said, her voice as expressionless as her cold gray eyes, "I guess I thought you'd look like . . . I don't know . . . that you'd have grown up to look like your father."

Layne knew he had to tread cautiously, like a hunter intent upon avoiding pitfall traps. "More like my mother, maybe?"

"I wouldn't say that, either. *She* wasn't supposed to die, you know. I didn't know she'd be there that night. Of course, I wasn't thinking straight. There is such a thing as being love-crazed, you know. . . . I really believed him when he said he was leaving her, that we'd go away together . . . And then he dumped me. Said terrible, wounding things to me . . . No, I didn't know she'd be there when I came to the door with a gun. You? I thought you'd be sound asleep in your little bed upstairs."

If her voice betrayed any emotion it was a trace of mild indignation, as if he'd had no business being there at all on that night so many years ago.

"I never dreamed you'd seen me from the top of the stairs. What was it you said in that letter ten years ago? That the shrinks had finally 'unlocked your memory' of what happened that night?"

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A satiric smile touched her lips. "How very *thoughtful* of you not to blow the whistle on Daddy's nurse. How much *kinder* to blackmail her."

Inwardly reeling under the shock of what he was hearing, Layne could only stare into those faintly accusing eyes.

"You said in your letter you wanted us to meet, that it would be to my advantage. To me that could only mean you were ready to stop bleeding me. Change of heart after all these years? Or is it because of this book you've written?"

Layne still said nothing. Her voice rose with sudden angry impatience. "Well, why don't you say something? I must get back. I told my husband I was going for a walk."

"Partly, yes," he said. "It's over, anyway. It's finished."

"Is it? Is it really? God, you'll never know what hell you put me through. Always being afraid that some quirk of conscience might cause you to tell the truth about what you'd seen and the cops would match my fingerprints to those they'd never identified. . . . Silly me. Monsters have no conscience.

"I suppose somehow you'd found out I married a banker. Could afford to keep making those small deposits in that account, so discreetly, so anonymously. All those years."

Like her, Layne seemed oblivious of the rain, of the cryptlike chill in the ruined church.

"So you think I've been punished enough, is that it? I'm off the hook?"

"Yes."

"How can I be sure of that?"

"You'll have to take my word."

She turned and walked away, then paused and beckoned to him. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

He followed her out of the church and through the tall wet grass to the neglected churchyard, picking his way among the gravestones to where she stopped beside a stunted cypress tree. She pointed down at a bunch of flowers lying against a headstone that bore the name Swan.

"I come here quite often," she said. "I pay my respects to my victims. No, not *my* victims. The victims of that mad, lovesick creature that I was."

Something in her voice or the sight of those flowers awoke in Layne a sudden horror of what he had done to Swan and of what Swan had done to this woman. A sort of trust fund, he'd called it. Blackmail. Money he didn't even need. Blood money. A form of punishment.

Pity was an unfamiliar emotion to Layne, yet now he felt an urge to confess part of the truth. He wanted to tell her the money was still there in the bank, untouched, and that she could have it, she could have it all.

The impulse, genuine or not, as quickly died. A passing madness, that's all it had been. *He* was not Swan. Swan was dead. Swan had deserved to die. The money was his, Layne Chase's. With that money all things were possible.

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He was aware of her moving behind him as he stared down at the grave, and then he raised a hand to his neck as he felt what might have been no more than the sting of an insect. Only when he turned to face her did he see the hypodermic needle in her hand. His eyes widened in disbelief and shock.

"Nurse's training," she said lightly. "You won't suffer. Not like I've suffered. The drug simulates cardiac arrest. That's what they'll assume. You visited their graves and were stricken with a heart attack. . . . I can't ever be sure it's over, you see. I can't take that chance."

Before the first convulsion left him insensible, Layne's last earthly sight was of the woman removing her letter from his hand and walking away from him among the gravestones, down the hill through the dripping trees. The last thing he heard was the melancholy cooing of a mourning dove. ●

"IT'S A HEAVENLY DAY, DEAR, DEAR CICELY. COME TAKE A LOOK."

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Good Shepherd

by Michael Gilbert

Being twenty-two years old, and unmarried, Hugo Bracknell, junior partner in the firm of Fearne and Bracknell, solicitors, found it convenient to lodge, for the time being, with his parents. Matrimony or bachelor independence would eventually move him to a home of his own, but until that happened he was content to enjoy, and be thankful for, his mother's housekeeping skills.

Feeling that the small sum which was all that his father, Robert Bracknell, would accept for board and lodging was insufficient, he had got into the habit of supplementing the cash by gifts in kind. This involved early morning visits to Covent Garden, where he bought fresh fruit and vegetables off the overnight lorries, and fishing trips down the river in the tub dinghy with its outboard motor, which was his pride and joy. These expeditions produced pollack, whiting, and, on one occasion, a huge eel, which had been devilish difficult to kill and which his mother had refused to accept. ("Can't stand the slimy creatures.")

On this particular Friday, having crammed a day's work into the morning, he had set off at two o'clock. The last of the ebb tide and the current combined to take him quickly and smoothly towards his chosen fishing ground off Royal Oak Point, where the Medway joins the

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Thames and the two rivers run out, arm in arm, to the North Sea. It was crisp October weather, and if he had listened to the local wiseacres he would have learned that it was what they called a weather-breeder, but he was too young to listen to greybeards.

He had slid past Lower Upnor and was approaching the Hoo Salt Marsh when the advance guard of the mist rolled in from the sea. Before he could take two deep breaths, visibility was down to a few feet. He was keeping a course a little to the left of mid-stream and making no more than four knots. He gave vent to his feelings in a navy-blue expletive and throttled down still further, keeping one finger on the klaxon.

Michael Gilbert's latest Fearne and Bracknell story exhibits many of the superior qualities on which the author, a former Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, made his reputation: colorful intrigue, a complex plot, and well-developed characters. The Fearne and Bracknell stories, all centered loosely around a fictional law firm, can be found only in *EQMM*. There are, as yet, no Fearne and Bracknell novels. ¶

Then everything happened at once.

The loom of a high-cut shearwater, the deep coughing of a powerful engine, a fast-moving grey bulk—then a single raucous shout.

He swung the rudder wildly, but his way was so small that his little craft hardly responded.

A glancing thud and an ominous splintering crash.

No lights, and *Hogging it on the wrong side of the river,* were Hugo's last thoughts as he found himself underwater.

It was not the first time that he had suffered violent immersion, and he had the sense to keep his mouth shut and not to struggle. He had no desire to come up under the propellers of that launch. When he surfaced he could tell by the feel of the wash that the immediate danger was past. He shook the water out of his eyes and swam towards the dinghy, which he could see bobbing in the tideway. When he reached her, he splashed round to the side which was higher out of the water and dragged down on it. This brought the further side into view and he was able to make a quick estimate of the damage.

A rib and two stretchers, he thought. The launch which had run him down had disappeared into the mist and the silence was now unbroken. Bloody swine. Not coming back to see what he hit, I don't suppose.

He hung for a few minutes, thinking. He was too experienced a waterman to be put out by any consideration of personal danger. He knew that he could reach either bank by swimming and the water, though cold, was not numbing as it would have been midwinter or early spring.

His concern was for the boat.

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He had another look at the damage.

He noticed that as long as he had his weight on the undamaged side no more water was coming in. It seemed to him that something might be effected, particularly as the tide was on the turn.

He splashed round to the stern and hoisted himself up—not an easy feat, but he knew what he was about—and a mighty heave landed him on the stern seat. This manoeuvre had put the dinghy dangerously low and the water was coming in fast. He shifted his weight until he was crouching on the undamaged side. This was sufficient to raise the hole above water. He then got out the dipper and started to bale. He had nothing to plug the hole with. Even a temporary caulk would have helped, and water was still coming in, but the intake was manageable.

One of the oars had gone overboard with the shock of the crash. Hugo took his stand in the stern and using the remaining oar—gondolier fashion—he propelled the boat slowly towards the Essex shore.

Twice he had to stop to bail, and by the time the shore loomed he was heartily glad of it. The situation had got beyond his vocabulary and he had stopped swearing. He was beginning to feel the effect of the cold and the limited movement possible in the tilted craft was doing nothing to restore his circulation. Nevertheless, when he had finally run the boat ashore and lugged it as far as he could up the shelving beach, he stood for a long moment, looking around him.

He was seeking a landmark.

A tiny breeze had sprung up, as happened sometimes at the turn of the tide, and despite the fact that dusk was now deepening into night, visibility was a little better than it had been. When he caught a glimpse of the chimney of the oil refinery looming through the mist, he knew that he must be close to one of the two bankside villages. Hoo St. Osmund or Hoo St. Lawrence. He thought it was St. Lawrence, the nearer of the two. That church, he knew, had been shut up, but even an abandoned church meant an old rectory and someone who might be helpful to a shipwrecked mariner.

He twisted the painter of the boat round a wooden stump, so old and so gnarled that it might have been there since the time of the Armada, and set out across the salt ooze, sinking deep at each step.

A stone wall loomed, low enough to climb. Once over it, he was in a wilderness. The long grass, laced with tile bushes, was difficult to push through, but at least the ground underneath was firmer. He was beginning to be thankful for this when he tripped over a hidden obstacle. It was a gravestone. This must be the churchyard of Hoo St. Lawrence. As he picked himself up he thought he could make out the loom of the church ahead of him. He remembered his father telling him that although it had been abandoned it was necessary, for some ecclesiastical reason, to reopen it once a year and hold a service. It must have been an eerie affair. What echoes of old hymns sung and old sermons preached might the intruders have heard; what ghosts might they have seen of past weddings and forgotten funerals.

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The breeze was strengthening now and the yew trees were starting to whisper.

Suddenly he found that he was shaking. It was not only the damp clothes, which were clinging uncomfortably to his body. There was something disturbing and unpleasant about this little church, crouching among the encroaching jungle of thorn and elder; awaiting the second coming, when all graves would be opened and the dead would rise from their long sleep.

Get out of it, he thought. The quicker the better.

He started forward at a stumbling run, until another obstruction brought him to his knees. Be careful, slowly now. Stupid to break an ankle. When, after a minute or two of cautious progress, he found himself up against the wall of the church he stopped to think. If he kept on round the outside, circling the west end, he must come to the porch. What would he find there? If ghosts could pick locks, might he find the church door standing open?

What he did find brought him up with a slamming heart. Someone was crouching in the darkness of the porch.

"Hullo," said Hugo. "What are you doing?" He spoke sharply, to get over the shock. He could see now that it was a small hunchbacked man, almost a dwarf.

"Nothing," said the man. "What's more to the point, what are you doing?" A semi-educated voice.

"I've had a ducking. I'm looking for somewhere to dry off. Is the old rectory still inhabited?"

"Aye," said the man, and seemed to have no more to say. Then, sensing Hugo's impatience, he added, "Cathcart bought it when the church shut up."

"Not Mr. Donald Cathcart, by any chance?"

"We're not on Christian-name terms," said the man sourly.

Could it be Cathcart, four years older than him, captain of cricket, in the fifteen; God of the house, whose football boots he had cleaned so diligently? He had heard that he had come to live in Essex and had sometimes wondered whether he might run into him.

"How do I find it?"

"Find what?"

"The old rectory," said Hugo patiently.

"You'll see the light."

He would have liked more precise directions, but the man was clearly unanxious to help him. He wondered why. But in fact, when he reached the wicket gate the way was clear enough. A beaten track led to the building ahead. In five minutes he was ringing the bell, and twenty minutes later he was in a hot bath and his clothes were drying in the airing cupboard. A long shot had come home. This was the Donald Cathcart he had known, now in his late twenties, with a charming wife, Celia, and an impertinent six-year-old son called Max.

With only a token show of resistance, Hugo had accepted the offer of

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a bed for the night. He had telephoned his father, who seemed to know the Cathcarts and approve of them. Over a late supper, Max having been removed, protesting, to bed, he was able to give his hosts an account of the events that had landed him at their door.

"That little hunchback," he said. "He'll be a local character, I imagine."

"Albert Revill. Revill the devil, the village children call him. I don't think there's anything actually satanic about him. They don't like him because if he catches them near the church, he chases them off."

"I got the impression he didn't care for me being there. Why should he want to keep people away?"

"Maybe a sort of residual authority. He was one of the late vicar's churchwardens. The only person who stuck by Kenneth Blacking to the end. It's a sad story. In the old days there may have been enough people to fill both churches. When church attendance fell it seemed sensible to concentrate on one of them. And there was no doubt in anyone's mind which to choose. Raymond Truelove at St. Osmund's was—and still is—a very popular character. A typical old-time parson. People enjoyed his sermons. Blacking's, on the other hand, were intolerably dull, and I found out why. When we moved in here we bought some of the furniture. All Blacking's personal stuff was moved out. Only the movers missed this cupboard in the attic. And guess what I found in it?"

Hugo made one or two light-hearted suggestions.

"No. It was a set of twelve volumes of sermons. Fifty or more in each volume. Six or seven hundred; one for every imaginable text."

"No wonder his congregation trickled off."

"It started as a trickle. Finished as a torrent. The trouble was that the defections only made Blacking more uncompromising. He antagonised even people who were prepared to wish him well. In the end, his congregation was reduced to two. The people's warden, old Colonel Enright, and the vicar's warden, Bert Revill. When Enright died, it was Revill alone. Blacking still wouldn't give up and he couldn't be moved. One evening, on the last day of June, when something kept Revill away, he conducted the whole service to an empty church and concluded it by cutting his own throat on the altar steps. He must have done it inefficiently, because his heart kept on beating and pumping out blood in a long stream as he crawled to the west door, which is where he was found when people looked in to see why the lights were burning."

"Since when," said Celia, "you won't be surprised to learn that the church is haunted. Particularly at the end of the month. That's where lights are seen and footsteps are heard."

"Twenty-fifth of September today," said Hugo thoughtfully. "Might that be why Revill was lurking in the porch? To scare off ghost hunters."

"Could be," said Cathcart, and switched the conversation to cricket.

Next morning he drove Hugo to Upnor to talk to the boatyard about

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rescuing and repairing his boat. Sam Curling, who ran the yard and knew Hugo well, listened to his account of the accident and said, "Big grey boat with a high waterline. Real seagoing craft."

"That's the one," said Hugo. "If you happen to know who owns it—"

"Nobody don't know that," said Curling. "Though many'd like to. All they know is he's seen in the estuary, after dark and always towards the end of the month. You're the only one he's actually sunk, though other craft have had narrow escapes."

"A mystery boat," suggested Cathcart.

"A mystery bloody nuisance," said Curling. "Howsoever, she don't seem to have done too much damage to your little treasure. Two ribs and a stretcher, you said. We'll soon have her patched up."

On the way back they stopped at the church and walked down through the churchyard to make sure that the boat was safe. Cathcart had brought a length of rope with him and they used it to supplement the painter.

"Can't be too careful," said Cathcart. "The river and the tide play odd tricks." Coming back, he stopped to light his pipe and when he had it going to his satisfaction he sat down on one of the tombstones. Guessing that he wanted to talk, Hugo selected another tombstone as a seat for himself.

Cathcart said, "Are you thinking the same as me?"

"Allow me to read your mind," said Hugo agreeably. "You've noticed the coincidence of times and places."

"Right."

"Here's this launch. A big and powerful boat, well able to cross the Channel."

"Or the North Sea. Or the Atlantic, come to that."

"Which means that it's probably based outside this country. It turns up towards the end of the month, after dark, and is spotted cruising in the estuary. After which it departs. Having deposited its cargo, shall we say, in this deserted and unvisited church."

"Right. And even if people did happen to see lights in the church, they'd be too frightened to make any close inspection. Then someone or other—"

"Stop beating about the bush. You mean Revill."

"All right, I mean Revill. He picks the stuff up and passes it on to its real recipients. What do you think it is. Drugs?"

"Very likely. So what do we do about it?"

"We make an examination of what you lawyers call the *locus in quo.*"

"How do we get in?"

"Actually," said Cathcart, "I've got a key. I found it tucked away behind those sermon books I was telling you about."

By daylight the church looked harmless enough. An hour of patient prodding and searching convinced them of one thing. Even a small church offered a hundred hiding places. Under font or pulpit, around or in one of the many tombs, under the altar, in and under the pews.

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When they had finished with the church itself, the vestry offered dozens of further possibilities.

"What we need is a team of professional searchers," said Cathcart.

"Or a bit of common sense. That launch was running a regular service. It was coming upstream when it hit me—on the way to the drop. The accident meant that it couldn't complete its run. Because I was between it and the church. But it'll be back, sooner rather than later, that's for sure."

"So what do you suggest?"

"All we need is a couple of sacks of dust."

"Ask Celia. She fills a sack every time she hoovers the house. What are we going to do with them?"

"We go in quietly, this evening. Take a sack each and spread it, working backwards, down the aisles and transepts towards the door. From now on Curling and all his friends will be keeping their eyes open. As soon as they report the arrival of the launch we go in, quick."

"Before Revill can remove what the launch has brought him."

"Right. When we find out what it is, we can decide what to do next."

"And talking about moving quickly, if we don't stir our stumps we're going to get ticked off for keeping lunch waiting."

This was one ordeal they did not have to suffer. As they drove back they were hailed by a cheerful, red-faced clergyman. He said, "I've fixed it with your wife, Donald. You're all coming to lunch with me. I've been given a couple of pheasants by one of our local poachers—he sings tenor in the choir—and my housekeeper cooks them to perfection."

So, for two hours, they were able to forget their plans and problems. The pheasants had been expertly cooked and stuffed with chestnuts. A bottle of Chambertin formed the perfect accompaniment.

On the way back, Cathcart said, "Raymond Truelove is an example of a nearly extinct species. An eighteenth-century village clergyman. A bachelor, unambitious, happy in his job, friends with everyone. A good shepherd."

Hugo said, "Also, I imagine, a man with income."

"Must be. That bottle of wine would have cost him most of a curate's weekly stipend."

Celia said, "Do you think it's wrong that he should have so much?"

"Certainly not," said Hugo. "If he does a good job."

"He does a first-class job," said Cathcart. "Not only the routine stuff, but all the unpaid chores we land on our parish clergy. Visiting the sick, organising collections for the needy—collections to which he makes generous contributions out of his own pocket. And he's particularly good with the kids. Persuading them to sing in the choir, preparing them for confirmation, and generally keeping them in order."

"If he can keep Max in order," said Celia, "that alone will justify his income."

Two days later, in the early evening, the call came. Hugo drove to Hoo

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St. Lawrence at a dangerous speed. Armed with a torch apiece, he and Cathcart traced the footsteps which could be picked out, with perfect distinction, in the dust they had spread. They led towards the font, but they found nothing in it or under it.

Hugo, who was examining the footsteps more carefully, said, "It looks as though he was standing tiptoe here just behind the font. You can see scuffling marks and the points of both toes. You're taller than me. Try and see if you can reach that little shelf."

It was there all right, the object of their search. Cathcart brought it down carefully. A neatly taped package, about eight inches square and ten inches deep. They carried it back to the house, where Celia produced scissors and a long-bladed paper knife. In the box were six 180E video cassettes. As they fixed one of these into the television set, Cathcart said, "If these are what I think they are, darling, I suggest you don't look at them."

"Don't be so Victorian," said Celia. "I'm enjoying this as much as you are."

All the same, after ten minutes, she took herself off, saying that supper needed looking after. The two men allowed the tape to run for a further ten minutes before Cathcart switched off the set.

He said, "It passes my comprehension how they can induce the actors to do such things. Particularly the boys."

"Pay them handsomely, no doubt," said Hugo. "What do we do now?"

Cathcart had brought down a stout volume with black covers. "Fifty sermons," he said. "I hope the men who come to collect the tapes appreciate what we're doing to improve their minds."

After supper, helped by Celia, they made up the book into a package closely resembling the one they had lifted and took it back to the church.

"No visitors yet," said Cathcart, examining the dust where the two previous sets of footprints could be distinguished. "Of course, it may be days—weeks possibly—before Revill ventures in to pick up the stuff. We shall have to set up a proper watch. When a light is seen in the church I come out, assisted by a stalwart gardener, and we catch the little bastard red-handed."

"And then?"

"Then we make a citizen's arrest. The curtain comes down. House lights on. God save the Queen."

"Quiet," said Hugo.

They stood looking at each other. They had both heard the noise. Without speaking, they slipped back into the shadows behind the font and stood there with their hearts thumping.

The door of the church, which they had relocked when they came in, was being opened and footsteps were coming towards them. The intruder was carrying a torch, which he used sparingly. When he reached the font it could be seen that he was carrying a heavy leather

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hassock out of one of the pews. Standing on this, he was just able to reach the ledge where the package lay. Having taken it down, he moved off.

A pause, whilst the hassock was being replaced in the pew, then the footsteps continued down the aisle. After that the sound of the church door being opened and relocked. Only then did the watchers move.

Hugo said, "For God's sake. What are we going to do?"

"Let's have a word with Celia. She may have some idea."

Celia said, "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. The back-glow of his torch showed his face absolutely clearly."

"It was Raymond Truelove. No doubt about it."

Neither man sounded happy.

"Then what are you waiting for? Tell the police. Now. Without wasting any more time."

"I suppose we must."

"If you don't," said Celia coldly, "and no one does anything, I suppose you realise that in a few years time this—this peddler of filth—will be preparing our son for confirmation."

Cathcart, at whom this broadside was directed, nodded unhappily.

"The police won't be best pleased with you for removing the original packet. Give them the tapes and tell them the whole story."

"I think," said Hugo slowly, "that before I do anything else, I'll have a word with my father. He usually sits up until I get back. I'll show him the cassettes. He'll know what we ought to do. You come too."

They found Hugo's father sitting in front of the fire smoking his good-night pipe. He listened impassively to what his son, interrupted from time to time by Cathcart, had to tell him.

When they had finished his father said, "What you've been up to may have been fun to start with, but it's ceased to be amusing. You're not a policeman, you're a solicitor and an officer of the court. And both of you—" swinging round on Cathcart "—are members of the public, with the obligations which that implies. You'll hand the tapes—I'll take your word for what's in them—to Chief Inspector Mayburgh and explain how you got hold of them."

"You mean, go round now."

"Certainly. You've wasted too much time already. I'll telephone the station to tell them to expect you."

Hugo didn't know how Cathcart was taking this. He himself felt about two foot high. They got into the car and drove, unspeaking, through the silent streets to the police station.

His father's telephone call had caught Chief Inspector Mayburgh on the point of going to bed. He had vented his exasperation by calling his assistant, young Inspector Barley, from his bed, and the two of them now faced Hugo and Cathcart in a silence that seemed more hostile than any amount of questioning. When they had finished and switched

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off the recorder that Barley had brought with him, Mayburgh said, "If you've nothing more to say, we'll have your statement typed out. You can sign it in the morning."

After they had departed, he sat for a full minute in silence before giving expression to his feelings.

He said, "Trust a pair of bloody amateurs to make a bloody mess of it. If he'd left the stuff where it was instead of that silly caper with the sermon book, we could have up Truelove with the cassettes in his possession. Then he'd have had some explaining to do. As it is—I suppose you realise—we've got nothing at all. As incumbent of both parishes, he'd every right to a key of that church. He saw a light and went in to investigate. Noticed this package, wondered what it was, and took it away to examine it."

Barley, who was a fair-minded man, said, "That doesn't explain two things, sir. Why he went straight to where the package was, and why he brought that hassock with him. Doesn't it show that he not only knew where the stuff was, but that it was somewhere high up?"

"Try it on the jury. You know what the defence will say. That he spotted the package up on the ledge, realised he'd need something to stand on to reach it, and fetched the hassock *after* he'd spotted it."

Barley nodded agreement. He'd seen juries bamboozled often enough.

"Right," said Mayburgh. "Let's think how to clear up this mess. We've been getting reports from time to time about that launch, haven't we?"

"From Thames Division. Yes, sir. And from Revill. He's been watching the church."

"So suppose Truelove is what these people clearly think he is. A middleman in a smuggling operation. We're not so interested in him. The men we want are the ones who are going to pick up the cassettes. We want them badly. And it wouldn't do any harm to identify the people they sell to. A few sharp lessons there would frighten off other prospective purchasers. What we have to do now is set a carefully organised watch on Truelove's house for the next few days. We'll need cooperation from the specialist squad at Central who deal with this sort of thing. I'll see to all that. You get the posts organised and the lines laid. If we move smartly we should have everything in position by tomorrow night. That should be soon enough."

They had underestimated the speed of the men they were hunting.

Next morning Truelove's housekeeper, who slept in a separate annex, ran screaming to the telephone.

"Horrible," she sobbed. "The things they've done to him."

Mayburgh examined the crumpled and contorted body on the bed. Professionally unmoved, he said to Barley, "They must have turned up soon after he got back from the church—may even have been waiting for him. Checked the parcel on the spot. Found they were being swindled. Suspected that Truelove was party to it and tortured him to make him tell them what he'd done with the cassettes."

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"Which he couldn't," said Barley. "Because he had no idea what had become of them."

Mayburgh, who had been examining the body more carefully than Barley cared to do, said, "The police surgeon will tell us, but my guess is that he died of shock. He was an old man. And when you see what they did to him—" He stared round the room that had been wrecked in a futile search for the tapes.

Barley said, "Hopefully they may have left some signs behind which will help our people to trace them. Fingerprints, footprints, things like that."

"I doubt it," said Mayburgh sourly. "They were professionals, not bloody amateurs."

When he heard the news Bob Bracknell said to Francis Fearne, "Not really one of our successes."

"Not really," Fearne agreed. ●

NEXT TO GODLINESS

by Peggy Wysong

He was the tidiest corpse they'd ever seen
The crime scene around was abnormally clean
His hands were both folded over his chest
His coat was of cashmere, also his vest

Forensic came, and worked as a team
But suddenly gave a terrible scream
"'Migod! The reason this fellow died
Is that none of his innards are left inside!"

Of all of his organs, from stomach to spleen
Nothing whatever was left to be seen
No clue to removal was left on his hide
No cuts to his chest, nor on either side

He was clean as a whistle, both inside and out
The coroner whimpered and started to pout
When a voice floated by "Please lift your feet.
Oh, why can't policemen ever be neat?"

The new cleaning lady came by, vac in hand
Sucking up fluffballs and pieces of sand
"That weasel was filthy—he messed up the rugs
A little bit more, and we'd have had bugs."

She whipped out his vitals for easy folding
To stack in a cupboard, beneath some fine moulding
She's still cleaning precisely, jail after jail—
Restricted, of course, to a mop and a pail.

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NEXT ISSUE...

Hard Labor Creek
BY POLLY WHITNEY

Worried Mother Job
BY BILL PRONZINI

The Frankenstein Footage
BY LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

The Patients
BY SEYMOUR SHUBIN

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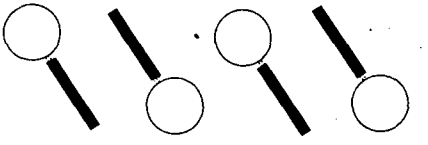

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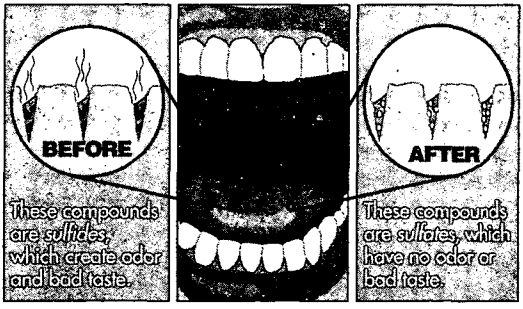
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Finally—a "cure" for bad breath!

For years, the cause of chronic bad breath has been misdiagnosed, but a dentist's research has led to TheraBreath™, a dramatic treatment system that works naturally and effectively.

These days, people spend a great deal of time on their health and fitness in order to look and feel their best. Unfortunately, many people around the world suffer from a condition that cannot be cured at a health club, spa or even a hospital: chronic bad breath or halitosis.

The only solution is the TheraBreath™ system. Because halitosis originates in the mouth, it is virtually undetectable by your own sense of smell. Without proper treatment, chronic bad breath can lead to a loss of confidence and self-esteem, and it can even result in depression. What's needed is a quick and effective treatment that works naturally with no side effects.


BEFORE
These compounds are sulfides, which create odor and bad taste.
AFTER
These compounds are sulfates, which have no odor or bad taste.

Oxyd-VIII™ *(concentrated pH-balanced ClO_2)*, the active ingredient in TheraBreath, transforms these odor-causing sulfides to sulfates, which have no taste or odor.

A scientific solution. Bad breath does not originate in the digestive system, and the food you eat has no direct effect on your breath. Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Acids in coffee and proteins in dairy products exacerbate the problem. Mints and mouthwashes intended to mask or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

Effective, safe and natural. At his California Breath Clinic, Dr. Katz has perfected a five-step program for treating halitosis. By using these products on a regular basis, chronic halitosis sufferers can end their problem. The TheraBreath system eliminates the problem of bitter or sour taste in the mouth, improves general periodontal health and will even whiten teeth. Unlike mouthwashes that are flavored heavily or designed to taste like medicine, TheraBreath has a mild spearmint flavor. These products are all-natural and simply introduce a greater amount of oxygen into the mouth's chemistry.

Try it risk-free. The TheraBreath System is an effective, safe and easy-to-use solution to a troubling problem, but don't just take our word for it. Try this product for yourself with our risk-free home trial. If you are not fully satisfied, just return it within 30 days for a full refund.

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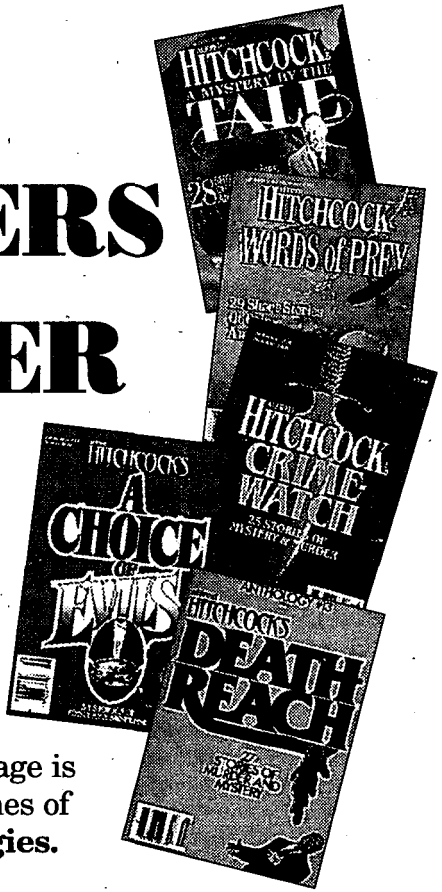

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Breakthrough dieting technique uses metabolic enhancers so you can lose unwanted pounds—*in just six days!*

European wisdom about cleansing the body by periodically abstaining from solid foods led to the development of the Six-Day BioDiet. This program of fruit and vegetable juice meals and metabolic enhancers can cleanse impurities from your body and take off up to 14 pounds in six days!

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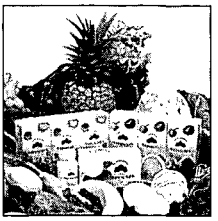

BioDiet cocktails are made from a wide array of fruits and vegetables. BioDiet provides all the nutritional value you need during the program.

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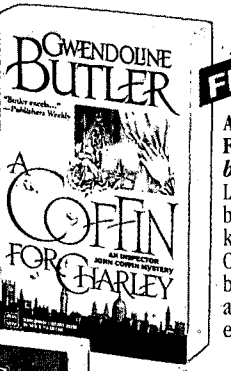

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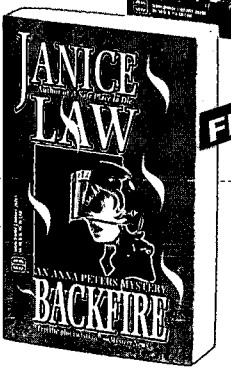

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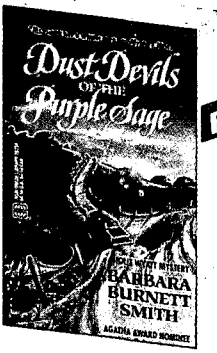

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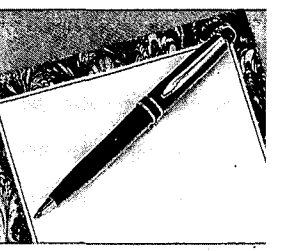

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